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Kusuriya no Hitorigoto

Arc 1: Inner Palace

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Novel Updates

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Chapter 1: Maomao

(I want to eat open air *kushiyaki*….)

Maomao sighed, gazing up at the downcast sky.

Her surroundings was the most beautiful, dazzling world she had seen yet, and now was within the muddied dregs that squirmed in miasma.

(Has it already been three months? I wonder if dad is eating.)

The other day, she met with the kidnappers, who were villagers with names Ichi, Ni and San, when she went to look for medicinal herbs in the forest.

It was truly powerful and extremely bothersome marriage activity. A Marriage Capture in short; they were hunters for women for the imperial court.

Well, she was getting paid, and she may be able to return to town if she worked for two years. It wasn't a bad place to work, but that really depended on the person.
This talk was a nuisance for Maomao who lived as a pharmacist.

It didn't matter to Maomao that the kidnappers were capturing young girls and selling them to eunuchs to earn money for their alcohol expenses, or that they were made as substitutes for their own daughters. Whatever the reason, it won't change the fact that she got roped into this.

If it wasn't for this, she would have no connection with the Inner Palace in this lifetime.

Court ladies, clad in beautiful clothes and cloying cosmetics and perfume, had shallow smiles fixed on their lips.

The pharmacist should come around to think. That there is no terrifying poison in the women's smiles.
And that the palace where the court officials lived, and prostitution quarter beneath the palace were not so different.

She carried the laundry basket that was left by her feet in her arms, and headed towards the interior of the building. The tasteless courtyard was different to the exterior. It had a stone paved pool, where servants who were neither male or female washed a large amount of laundry.

The Inner Palace was forbidden to men. Only the countries' elite noble ones and their blood relatives, and the men who lost their most important thing were those who could enter. Of course, the ones working there are the latter.
While thinking it was warped, Maomao wondered if it was done because it was advantageous.

She set down the basket, and looked the rows of lined up baskets in the nearby building. It wasn't dirty laundry, just washing laid out for the sun.

She looked at the wooden tag that was attached to the basket. It had a drawing of a plant and a number on it.

There were also those who couldn't read among the court ladies. This was because it included those who were kidnapped too. Before they were bought into the imperial palace, they were taught the minimum etiquette, foregoing words as that was difficult. It is stretching to say the literacy rate of girls from rural places to be about half.

To say about the abuse in the Inner Palace that has become too large, the amount has increased but it is vicious.
Although it cannot possibly amount to the previous emperor's

flower garden, the current one was a large family that consisted of two thousand consorts and court ladies, and three thousand eunuchs altogether.

Within that, Maomao was among the lowest of maidservants, receiving not even a government post. She especially lacked a backing shield; it was a given with the numbers of girls who have been kidnapped and force to form the majority. Well, if only she had a plump body like tree peony and skin white like the full moon, then she might have the chance to serve a low ranked consort. Vibrant skin covered in freckles, and limbs like a dead branch was what Maomao had.

(Let's finish this job quickly.)

Locating the basket with a tag that had plum flowers and "One-Seven" written on it, she slightly quickened her pace. She wanted to return to the room before the deep overcast sky started to cry.

The owner of the basket of laundry was a low ranked concubine. Compared to the other low-ranked consorts, the quality of the furniture in the private room she was bestowed was gorgeous but overly extravagant. One way or other, it gave in to the expectation that the owner of the room was a wealthy merchant's daughter. It is possible for those with a rank to have a lady's maid; consorts with low ranks were allowed two at most. Therefore, maidservants like Maomao, who didn't have a master to serve, carry laundry like what she is doing right now.

Low ranked concubines were permitted a personal room within the inner palace. But as these were located at the edge of the palace grounds, it would be rare to catch the emperor's eyes. Even so, if she was ordered to attend to his bedside even once, she can move rooms. A second time chosen had the meaning of a promotion.

On the other hand, consorts who have passed the suitable age without making the forefinger move, as long as their families have no substantial political power, would have their ranks lowered. At worst, they would end up being bestowed. Whether that is

unfortunate depended on the person; it seemed that being bestowed to eunuchs was the most fearsome for court ladies.

Maomao knocked on the door lightly.

“Leave that aside over there.”

It was a lady’s maid who opened the door and bluntly answered.
There was a consort with a wafting saccharine scent waving a wine cup about inside.
Before entering the inner palace, she was praised to have a beautiful figure. She was, after all, like a frog in a well . After being overpowered by the other gorgeous flowers, and breaking her nose, she hadn’t left her room recently.

(If you’re inside the room, no one will come for you.)

Maomao received the laundry from the room next door and went back to the washing area.

There was still a lot of work left.
It wasn’t that she liked it. She planned to work for her pay.

Diligent by nature, that was the former pharmacist Maomao.

She could eventually leave if she worked obediently.
By no means would she be chosen as a mistress. It was impossible.

It was regrettable that it could be said that Maomao’s thoughts were too optimistic.
No one knows what will happen. That is life.

She possessed farsighted thinking for a seventeen-year-old girl.
Even so, she had something that couldn’t be restrained.

Curiosity and the thirst for knowledge.

And, a little sense of justice.

In a couple of days, Maomao will be exposed to the certain strange truth.

The serial deaths of the infants born from the Inner Palace. It was called the Previous Concubine's Curse. For Maomao, it was bizarre, but a trifling thing to her.

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Chapter 2: The Two Consorts

“Ahh, so it was really like that.”

“Yes, I heard that was what the doctor saw upon entering.”

Maomao had tilted her ears as she sipped her soup. Several hundred maids were eating breakfast in the spacious dining hall. They had a soup and a cereal porridge.

The maidservant sitting diagonally across her continued to gossip. She had a pitiful expression, but beyond that, curiosity was shining from the inside of her eyes.

“It was the same with Gyokuyou-sama, and Rifa-sama too.”

“Woah, those two as well. Still, it was half a year, and three months, right?”

“That’s right. It must be the curse.”

The mentioned names were the emperor’s favourite consorts. Half a year, and three months were the ages of their respective imperial children they gave birth to.

Rumours stride in the Inner Palace. They were about the court ladies who were their emperor’s mistresses and the heirs, and since there were also bad reputation due to bullying and prejudice, there were even those that sound like fitting ghost stories in the sweltering heat.

“I guess so. Otherwise there’s no reason for those three to pass away as well.”

The ones who passed away were the children the consorts’ gave birth to; so to say, this was about the imperial children who could be chosen as successors. There had been one when the emperor was

the crown prince, and now as the emperor, two. All of them passed away when they were infants. Though it is obvious that the mortality rate of infants are high, having three children from high ranked people to die was strange.
As of now, only Gyokuyou and Rifa's children are surviving.

(Could it be poisoning?)

Maomao reached a different conclusion as she held the hot water. Two had been princesses among those three children. Since only boys can be bestowed succession rights, there were no reasons to kill princesses.

The two sitting in front of her continued to speak curses and calamities without moving their chopsticks.

(There is no such curse.)

Absurd. It all boiled down to that single word. Maomao's thoughts of the method of family extermination just because of a curse was pretty much heresy. However, Maomao's mind had knowledge she could assert her basis on.

(What kind of illness? Could it be genetic? How did they pass away?)

It was then the quiet and unsociable maidservant spoke to the talkative maidservant.

The regret from losing to her curiosity, was something that happened a little while later.

"I don't know the details but, it was said they all gradually got weaker."

The talkative maid, Shaoran who spoke with Maomao had an interest on the topic. Afterwards she also told her about the rumours.

“I believe Rifa-sama’s has it worse, seeing how the doctor has been seeing her more often.”

She said as she wiped down the window frame with a wrung dust-cloth.

“What about Rifa-sama herself?”

“Yes, mother and child both.”

The fact that the doctor was seeing Consort Rifa more often suggested that it was the crown prince who was sicker. Consort Gyokuyou’s child was a princess.
The emperor’s favour was deeper for Consort Gyokuyou, but it was clear with the gender of the children who was the more important one.

“While I don’t know the specifics of the symptoms, of course, I heard there were things like headache, stomach aches, and nausea.”

Shaoran went to her next job, apparently satisfied, after she said everything she knew.

Maomao gave her tea with liquorice as an expression of gratitude. It was made from the ones that grew on the edges of the courtyard. It had the medicinal pungency but was strongly sweet. The maid who rarely tasted sweetness was overjoyed from that.

(Head ache, stomach ache and nausea…)

As she recalled the symptoms, she could not form an answer. *You must not think of things through speculation alone,* her dad had severely told her.

(I’ll try go there in a bit.)

Maomao decided to finish her work quickly.

The scale of the inner palace, even if you put it all together, was vast. Normally, there are two thousand court ladies and over five hundred stay-in eunuchs.
Though maids like Maomao were crammed into large rooms in groups of ten, low ranked consorts had their own rooms, middle ranked consorts had buildings and high ranked consorts had large palaces that were larger than towns complete with a dining hall and garden.

Therefore, Maomao cannot leave her station in the east side. She had no free time as she could only leave when she is called to work.

(If I have no tasks, I can just make do with something.)

Maomao talked to a court lady who was holding onto a basket. The basket in the court lady's arms had high quality silk that must be washed in the pool on the west side. It would be damaged if it was washed in the east side, whether it be due to the water quality or having different people to wash it.

Though Maomao knew about the difference of drying it in the shade on the deterioration of silk, it wasn't something she needed to say.

"I want to see the extremely beautiful eunuch that is said to be at the central."

After talking about something which she had incidentally heard from Shaoran, Maomao gladly took over.
Here where the incentive for romance is scarce, it appeared that even eunuchs can be a target for motivation. After court ladies resign, you can sometimes hear that some become the wives of eunuchs. That they still have a healthy lust for women, is still something that tilts heads.

(I wonder if I will turn out like that?)

Maomao groaned and folded her arms when she asked herself that.

After swiftly delivering the laundry basket, she looked at the red building that was situated in the central. It was an elaborate palace, more refined than east.

As of now, the Crown Prince's mother, Consort Rifa, resides in the largest room in the Inner Palace. While the emperor is lacking an empress, it can be said that Consort Rifa with the only male child is the most influential person.

Inside that sort of place, the spectacle she saw was not much different to town.

There was a scolding woman, a woman who hung her head in shame, flustered women, and a man who was acting as the mediator.

(It's not much different to a brothel.)

Maomao joined the onlookers as the third party, with extremely calm thoughts.

The scolding woman was the inner palace's most influential person. The one looking down was the next powerful. The flustered ones were their maids. And the one who came into mediate was the doctor who was already no longer male. That was what she gleaned from the surrounding whispers.

"It's your doing. Just because you yourself gave birth to a daughter, you wanted to curse the male infant to death, didn't you!"

Her beautiful face that was distorted to something terrifying. Her looks, which was like a demon, and her white skin, which was like a ghost, faced the beauty who had her hands drawn towards her cheeks.

“You know that sort of thing is impossible. Shaorin is also suffering in the same way.”

The woman with red hair and jade eyes replied coldly. Consort Gyokuyou with her western features gazed up towards the doctor’s face.

“As you said, I want to see your daughter’s condition as well.”

Although the doctor acted as the mediator, the reason for the outburst seemed to be about him.
The doctor had just seen crown prince; it seemed she raised a protest about him not seeing her own daughter.

Maomao didn’t understand mothers, but it is a given that male infants came first in the structure of the Inner Palace.
Considering the doctor, she saw he had a face that wanted to say ‘unfounded’.

(Is he an idiot, that quack.)

That he didn’t notice with the two consorts standing so close to him. No, he didn’t even know about it before that?

The death of the infants. Headaches. Stomach aches. Nausea. And Consort Rifa’s white skin and unsteady body.

Maomao left the place of discord while muttering and grumbling to herself.

While thinking,

(What can I use to write?)

Consequently, she took no notice of a passing person.

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Chapter 3: Jinshi

“So it happened again.”

Jinshi’s handsome face was suffused in gloominess. He had delicate features that could be mistaken as a woman, with almond eyes. His hair was wrapped up in a silk cloth, the rest flowing down his back.

It was improper for the flowers of the court to raise a commotion in such a place. Bringing that to a close was one of his jobs.

When he was in the middle of dispersing the crowd, there was only one person who walked over with an unconcerned air.
She was a short maidservant with freckles that densely covered her nose to her cheeks. Though she didn’t have features that stood out, her figure left an impression of one who was talking to herself without noticing him.

He didn’t expect there would be any more to it.

The discussions of the crown prince’s passing that came about not even a month after.

The bawling Consort Rifa was skinnier than she was a couple of days ago. There were no traces of time she was called the large Rose. Was it because she was ravaged by the same illness as her son, or was it that her illness was severe?

From that, the hopes for another child were probably gone.

The older sister of the crown prince from another mother, Princess Rinrii’s condition improved after an hour of poor health. The mother and child consoled the emperor who lost the crown prince.
With the emperor coming often, the next child might be near.

The princess and crown prince were inflicted with the same illness of unknown cause. One recovered, one fell.
Their ages may be different, but the three month difference may have a big influence on the infants' physical conditions.

However, what about Consort Rifa?
If the princess recovered, Consort Rifa might recover as well. Otherwise, she may be emotional from the death of her son.

As Jinshi parsed over the documents and stamped them, his mind spun, thinking it over.

If there is something different, it would be Consort Gyokuyou.

"I'll be away for a bit."

After he finished stamping the last document, Jinshi left the room.

The princess with cheeks like steamed bun had the innocent smile of a baby. Her small hands made fists and grabbed onto Jinshi's index finger.

"There there, please let go."

The red-haired beauty gently took her daughter back into her arms, and went to put her to sleep in the basket.
The baby pushed aside the hot blanket, and babbled happily while looking towards the visitor.

"You have something you want to ask."

It appeared that the wise consort sensed Jinshi's anticipation.

"How has the Princess-dono recovered?"

At the point-blank question, Consort Gyokuyou let out a small laugh and took out a piece of cloth from her bosom.

On the piece of cloth that was ripped out without using scissors. Clumsy words were written on it. It wasn't that the words were written messily. The blotted text was hard to read because it was written with plant juice.

'*The face powder is poison. Don't let the baby touch it*.'

Was the writing purposely messy?
Jinshi tilted his head.

"Was it the face powder?"

"Indeed."

Consort Gyokuyou entrusted the princess to the wet nurse and took out something from a drawer.
It was a ceramic container wrapped in cloth. She opened the lid, and white powder danced.

"The face powder?"

"Indeed, this is the face powder."

He pinched the white powder wondering what could be inside it. Come to think of it, Consort Gyokuyou who originally had beautiful skin didn't use the face powder. Consort Rifa heavily covered her face to hide her bad complexion.

"The princess is a glutton. Just my milk wasn't enough for her. I only let her drink from the wet nurse when mine wasn't enough."

She employed a wet nurse who had lost her child soon after giving birth.

"This is what the wet nurse used. She liked to use this as it was whiter than the other face powders."

"How is the wet nurse?"

"She took a break when her physical condition got bad. I planned

to give her sufficient retirement money."

Those were the words of the intelligent, overly kind consort.

What would happen if there was poison inside the face powder? If the ones who used it were mothers, their foetuses would be affected. Even after birth, the infants could get it in their mouths too.

Jinshi and Consort Gyokuyou didn't know what it was. Just that this was the poison that killed the crown prince.

"Ignorance is a sin. We should take more care in what the infants are putting into their mouths."

"I agree with that."

As a result, four of the emperor's children were lost. If they included those still in their mother's wombs, more might be affected.

"I want to inform this to Consort Rifa as well, but I think that anything I say will backfire."

Consort Rifa was coating her bad skin complexion with the face powder even now. All without knowing it was poison.

Jinshi looked at the piece of unbleached cloth. He had a mysterious feeling that he had seen this before.
The messy words also looked like it was to hide the handwriting. However, where he seen this feminine script?

"Who could have done this?"

"It was the day I got the doctor to look at my daughter. After all, this was left by the window after I troubled you. It was tied to an azalea branch."

So, could it have been that they figured something out when they were at the commotion and wanted to leave some advice?

Just who could it have been?

“The palace doctor wouldn’t do such a roundabout thing.”

“Indeed. It seemed he didn’t know how to treat the crown prince even till the end.”

The commotion from that time.
Come to think of it, he recalled an unconcerned maid from the group of onlookers.
What was she muttering about?

What did she say?

‘*What can I use to write*?‘

Suddenly, everything in his head connected.
He burst out with an evil snicker. A beautiful smile, like a celestial maiden’s, appeared.

“Consort Gyokuyou. The owner of those words, what shall we do when we find them?”

“Of course, they are our benefactor. I want to give thanks to them.”

“I understand. Please wait for a bit.”

“I await your good news.”

Jinshi followed the memories of the cloth that was embedded with feelings.

“If the Favoured Consort so wishes, I must certainly find then.”

The celestial maiden smile gained the innocence of a treasure hunting child.

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Chapter 4: The Celestial Maiden's Smile

The crown prince's passing was known when the black bands were delivered during dinner.
Signifying mourning, it was to be worn for seven days.

The meals at those times, which hardly had meat even at the best of times, had none at all, so she frequently pursed her lips.
A lowly maidservant had meals two times a day, consisting of cereal and soup. Once in a while as a treat, there would be one vegetable dish. The portion sizes were enough for the overly skinny Maomao, but there were many times she thought it was lacking.

There were obvious things when the maids were all lumped together.
If there were those who were born as peasants, there were town girls too. Though their numbers were few, there were also the daughters of officials. Although with officials as their parent, they should be treated somewhat better, even so there was the issue of their reasons for working and the issue of how the person was raised. Those who could not read or write had no way of becoming consorts with rooms.
A consort is an occupation.

(So it was meaningless in the end?)

Maomao knew about the cause of the crown prince's illness.

Consort Rifa and her attendants used the white face powder lavishly. It was a high-class item that cannot be obtained by commoners.

It was also used by the brothel's high-class prostitutes. Prostitutes who earn a farmer's lifetime of silver in a single night also use it. If there were those who buy it themselves, there were also those who received as a present.

The prostitutes ruined their body by copiously applying this white powder to their face and neck, and several had died from it. Even though dad had told them, “Stop it”, they continued on with it.

Maomao had also seen many of these prostitutes die from weight loss and weakness by her dad’s side.

By trying to have both life and beauty, in the end they lost both.

That was why she broke off a short branch, wrote a simple message and left it at the two consorts’ place. Well, she didn’t think that they would believe the warning from a lowly maidservant who had no paper or pen supplies.

When the mourning broke, the time when the black bands could no longer seen, she heard a rumour about Consort Gyokuyou. Apparently, with the crown prince lost, the grieving emperor was affectionate to the surviving princess.
She heard nothing about him going to Consort Rifa who lost their child.

(How convenient.)

Maomao gulped down the soup that had small bits of fish in it, and headed to her work station where she was to tidy up the tableware.

“A summoning, you say?”

Maomao who was carrying a laundry basket was called to a stop by a eunuch.
It was about coming to the Chief Palace Official’s room in the middle area.
Palace officials are one of the three sections that divide the inner palace, a low ranked court lady so to speak. The other two were Inner Officials, the consorts with rooms, and the Eunuchs, who were equivalent to a department of attendants of the inner palace.

(What do they want?)

The eunuch also spoke to the maids around her. Looks like it wasn't just her.

It must be that they don't have enough people.
Maomao left the basket in front of the room and followed after the eunuch.

The Chief Palace Official's building is close to the main gate, which was one of the four gates that connect the inner palace to the outside. The emperor will surely go through this gate on the occasion he visits the inner palace.

She may be summoned, but it wasn't really a comfortable place. It was haughty.

While it somewhat paled in comparison to the building of the Inner Palace Chief next door, it was a structure more extravagant than the buildings of the middle-ranked consorts. Each handrail was carved, and on each of the red pillars, lifelike dragons entwined around it.

When she was urged inside, she saw that the room only had a single large desk. It was tasteless beyond expectations. There were about ten maids gathered within, not counting Maomao's group. Their expressions ranged from uneasiness and anticipation, to excitement.

"Yes, we are done. All of you can return now."

(Huh?)

It was cut off weirdly for some reason. Only Maomao entered the room, and the maids remaining in the room quizzically left.

Even though the room was still spacious enough to fit more people.

As Maomao tilted her head, she noticed the gaze of all the court ladies around her were fixed to a single point.
A woman sitting inconspicuously in the corner of the room, and the

eunuch who worked for her. There was a senior woman who was standing a little far off. She remembered that the middle-aged woman was the Chief Palace Official, but that aside, who was the important looking woman?

(Mm?)

Shoulders were wide for a woman. Wearing simple clothes. Hair gathered in cloth, with the rest down.

(A man?)

He looked at the court ladies with the tender smile of a celestial maiden. The Chief Palace Official was getting red.

So that's why. She understood why everyone was blushing.

Maomao thought that this man must be the beautiful eunuch from the rumours.

He was just as beautiful as a painting of a celestial maiden with silky hair, flowing features, almond eyes, and brows like willow.

(Such a waste.)

She thought of such words without blushing. As he lost his most important thing, he cannot make children. If that man had children, they would be excellent specimens no matter what.

However, with just that otherworldly face, the emperor would also ensnare him. While she was thinking of such disrespectful things, the man stood up elegantly.
Facing the desk, he picked up a brush and elegantly wrote something with a flourish.

With a saccharine grin, the man showed his note.

Maomao froze.

‘*The girl with the freckles. You’re staying overtime.*’

That was a summary of what was written.

Perhaps he noticed that Maomao hadn’t moved.
His entire face was smiling.

The man put away his writing, and clapped twice.

“We are done for today. You can return to your rooms.”

The maids while puzzled, left the room with the backs of their hair shining. They didn’t unable to understand the meaning of that note from before.

The maids who left the room were all short. Maomao noticed that they had faces that stood out with freckles. However, the ones who made no reaction to the writing probably couldn’t read it.
That note didn’t single out Maomao.

She was going to leave with the rest of the maids, when a firm hand landed on her shoulders.

She timidly looked back. There was the smile of celestial maiden that was so dazzling her eyes were blinded.

“You can’t do that. You’re working overtime.”

Needless to say, she couldn’t refuse.

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Chapter 5: With a Room

"How mysterious… It was decided you couldn't read when they asked you."

"Yes, I am of humble birth. Maybe they made some mistake?"

(As if I would tell anyone.)

Is what she wanted to exclaim but didn't.
She was entirely playing dumb.
There was a difference in the treatment of maids who could read, and maids who couldn't. Though each were useful in their different ways, it was easier to go about pretending to be ignorant.

The beautiful eunuch was called Jinshi.
Even though he had an elegant smile that couldn't kill even an insect, she felt something squirming for some reason. If it wasn't for him, Maomao wouldn't be standing here with this dilemma like so.

Jinshi told her to be quiet and follow him.
She, the disposable lowly maidservant, had no choice but to meekly follow him, feeling lightheaded to the point that if she shook her head it would fly. Her mind spun. What will happen after this? How would she properly deal with it?

Though it wasn't that she could think up the reason as to why Jinshi was leading her like this, why he exposed *that* was a mystery.

About the messages she sent to the consorts.

She studied the piece of cloth in Jinshi's hand. There was messy and awkwardly written text on it.

She did not tell anyone that she could write. She was also silent about her pharmaceutical knowledge of poisons. Needless to say, there was no way people would recognise her handwriting.

Although she confirmed her surroundings when she placed it, she was probably seen by someone.

The criterion was for a short maid with freckles.
For starters, no doubt he gathered the ones who could write first, and gathered their handwriting. Altered handwriting would still leave behind distinguishing traces.

If there was no person among the group that matched the criteria, he would then gather those who couldn't write.
The judgement on whether they could read or not was as before.

(What a skeptical person. Rather, he has too much free time.)

They arrived at their destination as she mentally slandered him.
As she thought, it was the palace where Consort Gyokuyou resided.

When Jinshi struck the door, a dignified voice answered with a curt "Come in."

There was a red-haired beauty lovingly holding a baby wrapped in a soft blanket when they walked inside.
The baby had a rosy face, with her mother's pale skin.
They heard the cute sounds of her sleeping, her lips slightly parted.
She was the very picture of health.

"I arrive with the person."

"Thank you for the hard work you have done."

It wasn't the same broken-down voice from before.
Her speech and conduct made one know their place.

Maomao lowered her head as Consort Gyokuyou gave her yet a different warm smile to the one she gave Jinshi.

Maomao widened her eyes, surprised.

“I can’t receive this type of treatment from someone who outranks me.”

She stated that, choosing polite words.

“No. My gratitude goes beyond that. You are this baby’s benefactor.”

“This must be some kind of mistake. Surely you got the wrong person.”

She broke out in cold sweat.
Even if she said it politely, there was no difference in the fact that she denied it.
She didn’t want to be decapitated, but she also didn’t want to be involved in this. She didn’t want to get entangled in a long incident.

Jinshi, who noticed that Consort Gyokuyou was making a slightly troubled face, displayed the flapping piece of cloth to her.

“Did you know that this is the cloth used for the work clothes of maids?”

“Now that you mention it, it looks similar.”

She played dumb to the very end.
Even though she knew it was futile.

“Indeed. These are used by maidservants that work for clothes duty.”

Palace officials were separated into six duties. Those in charge of clothes wore working clothes; Maomao who oversaw washing duty was placed into there.

The unbleached skirt was the same colour as the cloth in Jinshi was holding.
The interior of the skirt has a section that was hidden by pleats.
Examining it would find a strange seam.
In short, the evidence was there.

She didn't think that Jinshi would do rude display before Consort Gyokuyou, but she was left with nothing else she could do.

She had no choice but to prepare herself for the worst.

"What would you suppose I do?"

She got a positive feeling when the two looked at each other. They both smiled warmly, eyes crinkling.

Under the sounds of the sleeping breath of the restful baby, Maomao, who wanted to disappear, made a small sigh.

The next day, Maomao packed her meagre belongings.

All her room mates and Shaoran were all jealous.
They chased her down with questions on how it happened.

Maomao, with a dry smile, had no choice but to evade it.

Maomao became a lady's maid of the Emperor's Favoured Consort.

Well, this is the so-called promotion.

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Chapter 6: Food Taster

The treatment gets better for court ladies with rooms, moreover for the lady's maids of the Emperor's Favoured Consort.

Her rank had risen up from the bottom of the pyramid structure to somewhere in the middle. According to what she was told, her wages also increased exponentially, but twenty percent of that wage goes to her family, or rather, the merchants who sold her.

She was provided a narrow room, not a worker's room she had up until recently.
Her sleeping quarters had upgraded from a straw woven mat and a sheet to a bed. The room was wide enough to fit two beds. She was happy that she no longer had to avoid stepping on her room mates when she woke up in the morning.
There was another reason that she was happy, but that was something she will know later.

The Jade Palace, where Consort Gyokuyou resided, had four other lady's maids aside from Maomao. As the princess was beginning to eat baby food, there hadn't been a need to employ a new wet nurse.
Compared to Consort Rifa who had more than 10 people with her, it was quite a small retinue.

Seeing as though she suddenly moved up the ranks from being the lowest class maidservant to work as a coworker, while she saw looks of disapproval from the maids, there weren't any harassment she had honestly expected.
Rather, what she saw were looks of sympathy.

(Why is that?)

She soon knew the reason.

Before her eyes was imperial court dishes made with lots of

medicinal herbs.
One by one, Consort Gyokuyou's head maid, Honnyan, placed small plates with portions of the side dishes before Maomao.

Consort Gyokuyou looked on apologetically but made no sign of stopping it.
The remaining three maids looked at her piteously.

A food taster.

Everyone became nervous because of the incident with the crown prince.
It was because of the circulating rumours about the Princess' illness and where the poison was slipped in. No doubt the maids, not knowing where the poison came from, were fearful.

From that, it wasn't strange that they would send in maids with a specialty in poison tasting as disposable pieces.

It wasn't just Consort Gyokuyou. It also included the Princess's food and the Emperor's nourishment dishes when he visits.

It appears that poison had been served twice when Consort Gyokuyou's pregnancy was known. One had been light, the other had stiffened up the limbs and damaged the nerves.

The maids, who had been nervously acting as poison tasters up until now, were honestly grateful towards her.

Maomao frowned as she looked at the served plates. They were made of clay.

(If you're worried about poisons, using silver is a given.)

Maomao picked up the garnish of the *namasu*with a pair of chopsticks and looked at it carefully.
She sniffed it.
She placed it on her tongue, making sure that there were no feelings

of numbness, and swallowed it slowly.

(I'm honestly not suited to be a food taster.)

It should be immediate onset poison. There was no meaning to entrust the poison tasting to Maomao if it was a delayed onset poison.
Maomao, who gradually made herself accustomed to poisons as an experiment, has perhaps become resistant to a large amount of poisons.
This wasn't the job of a pharmacist. It was for the sake of fulfilling Maomao's intellectual desire.
In a different place and era, she would surely be called a 'Mad Scientist'.
Even her dad, who taught her the skills of a doctor, was shocked about it.

When there was no changes to Maomao's body and she affirmed that there was no poison with her own knowledge, Consort Gyokuyou finally started to eat.

Next up was the flavourless baby food.

"I believe it would be better to replace the plates to those that are made of silver."

Without putting any feeling to it, she told that to her Boss, Honnyan.
She was summoned to Honnyan's room to report on today's actions.
It was a spacious room, lacking in gorgeous ornaments that bespoke of her practical personality.

The beautiful, black haired head maid who faced her thirties sighed.

"It's really just as Jinshi-sama said."

She confessed with an amazed face that they did not use silver tableware on purpose.
Because Jinshi instructed so.

Likely, he was also the one who ordered her to be a poison taster.

Maomao listened to Honnyan with a cold expression, fighting back her bad mood.

“I don’t know for what reason did you hide your knowledge and skills on poison and medicine. Even if you just said you could write, you would have been paid more.”

“It’s because I lived as imitation of a pharmacist. Even though I have been kidnapped and taken away, when I think that the kidnappers are still receiving a fair share of money, I get seriously pissed.”

She let out a few rough words in her heightened emotions. But the head maid didn’t blame her.

“So you are saying that even if your wages decrease, the money goes into those guys’ alcohol expenses.”

It seemed that the smart maid deduced Maomao’s intentions.

“As much as you like, if you are incompetent, you will be replaced after two years of service.”

She sympathised, while it was something she didn’t need to understand.

Honnyan picked up the jug from the table and handed it to Maomao.

“What is…”

Just as Maomao was about to ask, a pain ran through her wrist. In shock, she dropped the jug onto the bed. Large cracks ran through the pottery.

“Oh my, this is quite expensive. You won’t be able to pay it back with the amount you earn as a maid. The money that is sent to your family won’t be enough either. Rather, you will have to be billed.”

The expressionless Maomao, understanding what Honnyan said, let out a cynical smile.

“My apologies. Deduct that from the pay that is sent home every month. If that is not enough, please take what I have on hand as well.”

“Yes. I’ll send the formalities to the Palace Official Chief. Well then.”

Honnyan picked up the fallen jug and placed it on the table. She then took out a wooden slip from the drawer. Her brush glided smoothly.

“This is the statement for the additional funds you get from food tasting. View this as insurance. If there are any points you are interested in, please ask.”

The amount of money was roughly the same as what Maomao currently earned. Excluding the portion that has been taken away as commission, it has been decided that Maomao made a profit.

(She is good with deals.)

Maomao left the room with her head bowed deeply.

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Chapter 7: Love Potion

The four maids who were there from the start were all very hard workers.
Although the Jade Palace wasn't that large, the four of them moved about constantly. Bedroom duty, otherwise known as housekeeping maids, also come in, but it had always been the four maids who cleaned up the whole interior.
By the way, the original maids had all divided up their jobs.

And so, the only job left for the newcomer Maomao was to eat.

She didn't know if they were feeling guilt due to them forcing the worst job onto her, or that they didn't want her to invade their territory. But all the maids aside from Honnyan didn't force Maomao to do anything. Rather, they forced her out of the room with a gentle "it's fine" when she comes in with the intention to help.

(I can't sit still.)

She was forced into her small room, only called out twice for meals and afternoon tea. For a couple of days, she also ate the nourishment dishes when the emperor came to visit. Once in a while, Honnyan would entrusted something onto her. But they were all quick, simple jobs.

(What is this? Eat and sleep?)

In addition to poison tasting, the meals have become more extravagant than before. The leftover sweet snacks from the tea party were given to Maomao as well.
She wasn't working hard like an ant. That nutrition will become fat at this rate.

(It's like I'm livestock.)

There was one more thing that Maomao was unsatisfied with, poison tasting aside.
Maomao had always been skinny. It was hard to know if her contact with poison had anything to do with it.
Moreover, as the lethal dose depended on body weight, there is a higher chance of surviving just by being fat.

It wasn't that Maomao didn't know how much the poison contributed to her skinniness. She had confidence that she could survive beyond lethal doses of poison, though it didn't seem to be the case for the ones around her.
The three maids pitied Maomao, who looked young with her short height and overly skinny frame, the poor disposable piece.
They fed her gruel, piling on seconds even when she was already full. She was also served one more side dish than the others.

(Reminds me of the big sisters at the brothel.)

Even though she is such quiet and unsociable thing, lacking that innocent charm. Why was it that the prostitutes doted on her? At every opportunity, they fed her, gave her sweets.

—By the way, what Maomao didn't realise was that there was a reason to her being doted upon.

Maomao's left arm was covered in scars.
Cuts, stabs, burns, scars from being stabbed with needles.
She was short, too skinny and had countless scars.
Her arms were often bandaged. Occasionally she went about pale faced and fainting.
Though the girl was quiet and unsociable, it was because of the treatment she received up until now that everyone was overwhelmed with tears.
Everyone thought she was being abused. But the truth was different.

Maomao inflicted everything on herself.

To study the effect of salves and drugs that stop inflammation. To gain resistance to poisons by gradually ingesting them. Sometimes she also got a venomous snake to bite her. There were times she got the amount wrong and fainted as a result.
Consequently, this was why the scars were all concentrated on her left arm, and not her dominant arm.

It wasn't that she had a masochistic, self-harming hobby. She was just too much into satisfying her intellectual desire that she was quite different from normal girls.

The one who was extremely bothered by such a daughter was her dad.
He was getting unwarranted slander before he knew it. Living in the prostitution quarter, he taught his own daughter medical knowledge and writing to give her another path outside prostitution.
He understood some of her motivations, but he condemned most of it.
He couldn't even think that his daughter, who was of age, would repeatedly harm herself for the sake of experiment.

For such reasons, everyone thought she was pitiful girl, who, after being abused by her parent, was sold to the inner palace and made to become a disposable poison taster.

People know nothing at all—

(At this rate, I'll become a pig.)

As Maomao thought of such things, a detestable visitor appeared before her.

The young man with an otherworldly beauty was lit with a constant heavenly smile.

The three maids prepared tea for the visitor while taking in his face.
Upon observing the sound of a quarrel from the other side of the

wall, it sounded like there was an argument on who will prepare it.

The amazed Honnyan prepared the tea herself, and directed the three to return to their rooms.

The food taster Maomao sniffed the contents of the silver teacup and held it in her mouth.

She felt like running away from the gaze of Jinshi, who had been staring intently at her for some time now. She squinted, trying to not meet his eyes.

As a young maiden, just by being looked at by a good-looking man, even if he was a eunuch, doesn't feel bad. But it wasn't like that for Maomao. She drew a line, even though she appreciated Jinshi's celestial maiden like beauty, because aside from that interest, there are too much differences between them.

"This is something I received. Can you taste it for me?"

Inside the basket were steamed buns. Maomao picked one up and split it apart. It was stuffed with minced meat and vegetables. Sniffing it yielded a medicinal scent.

It was the same as the tonic she ate the day before yesterday.

"There's aphrodisiac in it."

"You didn't even need to eat it to know."

"It's not harmful to your health. Please take it back. Savour it."

"Nah, when I think about the one who gave it to me, I really don't want to eat it."

"Indeed. You might get a visitor this evening."

Jinshi made a wordless expression at Maomao who stated that disinterestedly. His reaction was different to what she expected. He tried to make her eat the steamed bun while knowing it was spiked with an aphrodisiac; he deserved to be just looked at like a pest. By the way, she wondered what kind of person did he receive it from.

Consort Gyokuyou laughed, her voice like a bell, at the two's banter. The sounds of Princess Shaorin's sleeping followed her footsteps.

Maomao bowed once and made to leave the guest room.

"Just wait."

"What do you require of me?"

Jinshi and Consort Gyokuyou looked at each other, and nodded. It appeared that they had settled on the main topic before Maomao came over.

"Can you make me a love potion?"

In an instant, Maomao's eyes glowed with surprise and curiosity.

Though she had no idea what use they had for that medicine, there was no mistaking that Maomao was all too happy to prepare it.

Maomao stated, while controlling her smile.

"Time, ingredients and utensils. If I can have those."

I can make a love potion if I have the things for it.

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Chapter 8: Medicine Shelves

What's the deal with this?

He crossed his arms, willowy brows knitted in gloominess. Jinshi would be called a courtesan if he was a different gender, but if the person himself want to do it, the question of gender wouldn't even matter.

Today as well, he was consecutively called out by a middle ranked consort and two low ranked consorts from the Inner Palace, and a military officer and a civil official from the Palace. As the military officer had gone as far as giving him a dim sum spiked with a tonic, he will return to his own room in the palace and won't be attending his night shift today. It was for the sake of self-defence; he was not skipping out on work.

He wrote the names with a flourish on the scroll on the desk. The names were the consorts who called him out today. They were severe cases, like seducing another man into their room and saying that it was because the emperor didn't visit. Although there was no formal report, hereafter, their sentence will be handed down.

Is his own beauty being the touchstone for the court ladies noticed by several small caged birds ?

A consort's rank is chosen, taking her parent's pedigree in consideration first, according standards of intelligence and beauty. Intelligence was harder to determine compared to looks and pedigree. They were required to possess the appropriate culture to become an empress. Additionally, they must also have a sense of virtue.

His unkind emperor decided to use Jinshi for the selection criterion.

It was also Jinshi who recommended Consort Gyokuyou and

Consort Rifa. Consort Gyokuyou was prudent and deeply modest. Consort Rifa may have an emotional personality, but she also possessed the appropriate spirit of one who bowed down to no one. Both were loyal to the emperor and held no wicked sentiment towards him.
Consort Rifa, in particular, adored him with her whole heart.

Jinshi's master was a cruel person.

The emperor arranged for consorts convenient to the country to produce children for him, and if they didn't have that ability, he cast them away.

From now on, it will be Consort Gyokuyou who will continue to receive his favour.
The last time he visited Consort Rifa, who is now emaciated like a ghost, was when the crown prince passed away.

Aside from Consort Rifa, there were also several other consorts who became unnecessary. Those ones, he returned to their family when he saw the chance, and had them bestowed.

Jinshi extracted one sheet from the piled documents.
Her name was Fuyou. With a rank of Primary Fourth Class, which was equivalent to a middle ranked consort.
The other day, this consort was bestowed to a military officer who was merited with the repelling of a foreign tribe.

"Well then, would it turn out smoothly?"

There shouldn't be any problems if it was carried out according to the plan in his head.
For that, maybe he could get some corporation from that unsociable doctor.

Though there were no shared feelings between them, it was the first time someone looked at him as though he was a pest.

The person had probably planned to conceal it, but she wasn't able to completely mask that faint contempt in her eyes.

He involuntarily burst out laughing. Like nectar that fell from the heaven, his laughter also contained a trace of inner evil.

Though he didn't really have a taste for oppressing people, it was strangely amusing. It felt like he got a new toy.

"What shall I do after this?"

Jinshi, after leaving the documents under the ink stone, decided to sleep.
He firmly locked the door so there will be no issues about visitors coming in at the dead of the night.

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Though the expression for panacea exists, there really isn't such an omnipotent medicine.
Those were the words Dad also told to Maomao when he was against her actions.

She wanted to make medicine that was effective for any illness and any person. For that reason, she made wounds that turned people's eyes away. And though she had developed new medicine, it wasn't her aim to perfect an omnipotent medicine at the moment.

The topic Jinshi brought up was interesting enough to Maomao, though she couldn't stomach it.
Since coming into the inner palace, the only thing she could make was hydrangea tea. She had been surprised that medicinal herbs that could be used as ingredient were growing inside the inner palace. But she had endured it, seeing as she had no tools, and she wanted to avoid doing questionable things in a large room.
The best thing about moving into the small room was for that reason.

Maomao went out to gather ingredient supplies, bringing the laundry basket along to mask her intent. This was something she

can now do this seeing as Honnyan had put her in charge of laundry duty.

She entered the medical office she was told about before while pretending to come deliver laundry. Inside was that flustered doctor from before and the eunuch who often accompanied Jinshi.

The doctor appraised Maomao with his eyes, touching his thin loach moustache.
It was as though he was saying, *why is this little girl invading my territory*.

(Please refrain from staring at this plain woman.)

Compared to the doctor, the eunuch courteously guided Maomao as if he was receiving a master.

Maomao let out the widest smile since coming to the Inner Palace when she walked into the room, which was enclosed by three walls of medicine shelves. Her face flushed, eyes glistened, and her normally pursed lips drew a soft arc.
She didn't care that the eunuch was looking at Maomao in surprise.

She surveyed the labels on the drawers, making a weird dance whenever she found rare drugs. She was overflowing with joy. The inside of her mind was not completely satisfied.

"What curse? So what?"

She repeated this for nearly one hour.
Jinshi, who appeared without her noticing, looked at Maomao strangely.

She assembled the ingredients, which were managed in drawers ordered from the edge. She bundled them into their separate medicine bags, and wrote down their names with a brush. It was extravagant to use paper so luxuriantly when wooden slips were still used.

When the loach moustache doctor came to peek, as if to wonder who she was, the eunuch closed the door in his face. The eunuch's name was Gaoshun.

Gaoshun was the one who fetched the things from the high drawers for her. His boss did nothing. *Go somewhere else if you're not going to do anything*, Maomao thought expressionlessly.

Recognising the name on the highest drawer, Maomao leaned up towards it. Gaoshun made a wordless expression when he saw what he handed over.

Some kind of seed laid on her palm.

"This amount isn't enough."

"In that case, the only thing we can do is to prepare it."

The good-looking man, who did nothing but smile and watch on uselessly, told her simply.

"This is something from the west, in particular the southern regions of the west."

"You might find it if you search the imported goods."

Jinshi pinched the seed. It looked like an apricot seed and emitted a peculiar aroma.

"What is this called?"

Maomao answered the young man's question.

"It's cacao,"

she said.

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Chapter 9: Cacao

“Your skills are better than I expected.”

Jinshi told Maomao with an astonished voice.

“I didn’t think I was that good either.”

She was somewhat stunned at the scene before her eyes.

“Ahh, is that so.”

There was no usual pointlessly bright smile.
He just looked extremely tired.

“How did it turn out this way?”

For that, they had to go back a couple of hours.

The cacao that was delivered came not as the seed but in the powdered form.
Maomao carried all the other requested ingredients to the kitchen of the Jade Palace.

The three maids had watched her in the spirit of curiosity, but returned to their respective workstations when Honnyan reprimanded them.

Milk, butter, sugar, honey, fruits dried in distilled liquor, aromatic herb oil. They were all high-class items with high nutritional value. At the same time, they could also used as ingredients to make a tonic.

Maomao had tried cacao only once. The prostitute who gave her the chocolate said that it was something kneaded into powder, mixed with sugar and hardened.

Though the piece was the size of her fingertip, eating it made her

feel like she drank up nail liquor.
The strange feeling became clear.
It was something a wicked guest gave to garner the interest of a popular prostitute by saying it was an unusual confectionery.
Regrettably, the prostitute was angry when she saw the Maomao who looked out of sorts, and she ended up grounded by the madam.

After that, there were times where she got her hands on a couple of those seeds, but she didn't treat them as a drug.
A pharmacist of the prostitution quarter had no customers who requested such a high-class item.

The chocolate in her memory was something hardened with fat.
Maomao, who can perfectly remember the scent and taste of medicines and poisons, had a clear memory of its ingredients.

As the season was still hot, Maomao didn't think that butter will set properly. So she decided to use it to cover the fruits. It would be perfect if there was ice, but of course, that was something impossible to obtain.
As substitute, she prepared a large unglazed jug and filled it hallway with water. Water evaporation will make the inside a couple of degree cooler than the open air; just cold enough for the fat to set.

Maomao put a spoonful of the mixture in her mouth.
Bitterness, sweetness, and a component that lifted her emotions passed through her tongue.

Maomao, who became strong to alcohol and poisons, didn't feel as high as she did before in the past. Nonetheless, she could feel a strong effect.

(Maybe it's better if I make them a little smaller.)

She cut the fruits in half and drenched them in the brown liquid.
Then she laid them on a plate and finished off by placing that inside

a container so it could float inside it.

She capped the jug and hid it with the straw mat. Now the only thing left was to wait for it to harden.
By the time Jinshi came to pick it up in the evening, so they should be already set.

(There's a little left over…)

There were still some of that brown liquid left over. The ingredients were very high class items, and were also high in nutritional value. Although it was a love potion, seeing as it wasn't that effective to Maomao, she decided to eat it later. She cut up a loaf of bread and soaked it in it. This way, there was no need for cooling.
She covered it and left it on the shelf.

She packed up the leftover ingredients in her room, and went to the pool outside to wash up.

That time, it completely left her mind that she should have bought the cut bread into her room as well. It might have been because she was a little high from the tasting.

Well, afterwards was a festival.

Afterwards, she was entrusted a job by Honnyan. The incident occurred when she was getting into the flow of harvesting the medicinal herbs that grew outside.

She was smugly holding onto the laundry basket with herbs, when she saw a blue faced Honnyan and a gloomy Consort Gyokuyou waiting for her. As Gaoshun was also there, Jinshi should have come too.

Honnyan, who was pressing her forehead, pointed Maomao to the kitchen. Gaoshun pushed her basket and led her towards the scene of the crime.

Jinshi was looking there with an amazed expression.

There were three maids sleeping, affectionately embracing each other. Their breasts were bared, skirts were turned up to their calves. Everyone had flushed, content faces.

Insolent words passed through her head about what happened before and after, but she tried not to think about it.
Rather, she didn't want to think about it.
Well, because they were all women, the worst case didn't happen, maybe.

There was the brown bread on the table.
Three pieces were missing.

Honnyan, Gaoshun and Maomao carried the maids to their respective rooms to sleep. And just as they did so, fatigue came with a rush.

In the living room, Consort Gyokuyou and Jinshi were looking at the chocolate bread curiously.

"Is this the mentioned love potion?"

"No, that would be this."

Maomao presented the thing that covered the fruits. Around thirty grains about the size of her thumbnail lined up.

"Then, what is that?"

"My supper."

Evidently, everyone was taken back as though she said something wrong. Gaoshun and Honnyan looked at her as if she was a strange person.

"I've gotten used to alcohol and stimulants, so it doesn't have much of an effect on me."

Maomao was a heavy drinker, because she once drank alcohol seeped in snake poison as an experiment.
Maomao categorised alcohol as a type of drug.

Jinshi picked up the bread and stared at it intently.

“Then, there shouldn’t be a problem for me if I eat it.”

“”Please stop that!!””

Honnyan and Gaoshun’s voices overlapped. It was the first time she heard Gaoshun’s voice.
Jinshi put the bread back onto the plate, saying it’s a joke.

Certainly, tasting a love potion in front of the Emperor’s Beloved Consort is disrespectful. But even with that mistake, anyone would be capable of straying from common sense if a celestial maiden’s beauty ever drew close with a flushed face.

“Shall we make it for the emperor next time? As a change in routine even.”

“It’ll have to be three times the effectiveness of the usual tonic.”

“Three times…”

Perhaps a means to continue, Consort Gyokuyou decided in a quiet voice on something that couldn’t be heard. How intense.

Maomao transferred the love potion to a container with a lid and handed it to Jinshi.

“Please aim to have one grain at a time as it is very effective. I think you will get a nose bleed if you overeat as it will cause the blood to over-circulate. Again, please use it when you’re together with a consenting partner.”

When she finished with the precautions, Jinshi stood up.

Gaoshun and Honnyan left the room, getting ready to return. Bowing once, Consort Gyokuyou also left the room, together with the sleeping princess in the basket.

When Maomao was about to put away the plate of bread, she smelt a sweet scent from behind.

“Thank you for making something better than I expected.”

She could hear a sweet honey like voice.
She felt something cold touch her neck as her hair was swept up.

When she looked over her shoulders, Jinshi was leaving the room, swinging one hand.

“I see.”

There was one less piece of bread on the plate when she looked away.
The aim of the criminal was on point.

“It’ll be good if there are no victims.”

Maomao muttered about other people’s affairs.

The night was still young.

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Chapter 10: Ghost Disturbance (1)

Infa, a maid who serves the Favoured Consort, Gyokuyou, will today as well work with whole-hearted devotion.
The other day, she committed the disgrace of sleeping on the job, but her master, Consort Gyokuyou did not blame her.
In that case, she shall commit her full body to serve and meticulously clean every single window frame down to the handrails.

Originally, this sort of act is unworthy of a lady's maid like herself, but even so, Infa will conduct herself as a maidservant. Because she had told Consort Gyokuyou that she loved to work.

When she entered the room to arrange the kitchen's tea utensils, the new maid was making something. Her name is Maomao, but she rarely speaks, so Infa isn't sure what kind of person she is.
Only that, hearing that the girl had scars on her arm from abuse, sold and was now employed as the poison expert was unbelievably unbearable.

Infa increased the girl's meals to fatten up her skinny body and didn't allow her to sweep, seeing how pitiful it was to see her exposed scars. The other two maids also thought the same way. As a result, Maomao didn't have much jobs to do.
This is fine, Infa thought.

The head maid Honnyan said, "This is not enough", and assigned Maomao to do the washing. As washing only required her to carry the basket, the scars on her arms do not stand out. She was also entrusted to do other small tasks.

"What are you making?"

The new maid was boiling some plants in a pot.

"Cold medicine."

She stated the absolute minimum of what she needs to say. *Surely, she was probably not good with socialising due to the after effects of abuse*, Infa thought to the point of tears.

As her knowledge of medicine is deep, she makes it this way sometimes. Infa had nothing to say about that as the girl cleans after herself perfectly, and the other day she received medicine for dry skin, which she treated as priceless treasure. Occasionally, it seems that Honnyan requests her to makes medicines as well.

Infa took out the silver teacups and meticulously polished them with a dry cloth.

Maomao doesn't speak much, but she is a good listener; someone worth talking to. Infa told her about the strange rumour that had been going around recently.

The rumours of a white woman dancing in mid-air.

○●○

Maomao headed for the medical office, bringing along the laundry basket and the cold medicine she finished making with her. Just this time, she wanted to get the doctor's judgement, even merely for form's sake.

(An incident from a month ago?)

Maomao tilted her head at the conventional bizarre tale.
This was yet another rumour she has never heard of before coming here. Shaoran had told her everything she knew as far as rumours went, so Maomao knew that this was a recent one.

The Inner Palace was surrounded by a wall. On the other side of the fence is a deep moat and the only way to traverse the place is through the four directional gates. It is impossible to escape or raid the place.
It was said that there is a consort who attempted to break out of the

Inner Palace and is still resting under the deep moat even now.

(Near the castle gate huh.)

There were no buildings close by, just an expansive pine forest.

(It was from the end of summer yeah.)

Although it was this season, it was harvest time.

As bad thoughts came to her head, she heard a detestable voice as if she settled on a target.

“Good work.”

Maomao maintained an expressionless face at the gorgeous peony like smile.

“No, not really.”

The medical office was close to the central gate in the south. The parlours of the three departments that govern the inner palace were also set up here.
Jinshi usually appears there.
As he is a eunuch, he should be in the department of inner servants. But this man is not attached to any room. Rather, he looks over everything like an overseer.

(It looks like his position is higher than Palace Official Chief.)

It is possible he is the guardian of the current emperor. But it was hard to imagine that for a young man who looks around twenty. There’s no reason for him to specially become a eunuch if he was the emperor’s son.
It is also thinkable he is the guardian of Consort Gyokuyou, seeing as they are close. Actually….

(The emperor’s mistress?)

In the case of the emperor’s visits, it is normal as far as seeing

him friendly with Consort Gyokuyou, but it doesn't match the person's appearance.
It is troublesome to think of such thoughts, so let's settle with him being the emperor's lover for the time being.

"You look like you're thinking of something extremely rude."

"Are you sure you're not imagining it?"

She bowed once and turned around. When she entered the medical office, she saw the loach moustache quack doctor rigidly grinding the mortar. Maomao knew that the doctor in this case wasn't making medicine but wasting time.
Otherwise, it is pointless for him to give away half the medicine he makes every time.

At the start, it seemed that he thought that she was a little girl who didn't know what she was doing, but his attitude gradually eased after he saw the medicines Maomao made.
Nowadays, he takes out tea cakes and it reached the point where he gave portions of unneeded ingredients to her, but that wasn't a very good thing for a medical office to do.
He doesn't really have confidentiality.

"Can you look at this medicine for me?"

"Oh, if it isn't the lass? Wait a sec."

He prepared tea cakes and crude tea. He had senbei instead of sweet manjuu.
Maomao, the drinker, was happy.
Recently, it felt like she had been forced to eat various things.

Although he is a quack, he is a good person. Though his personality is good, he is the type that is bad at his job.

"I want a share of that too."

It was a sweet, willowy voice.
Even without looking back, for some reason, it felt like the air around her completely brightened up.

The quack doctor, with a look of surprise and elation, replaced the senbei and crude tea he troubled himself to make, and bought out white tea and moon cakes.

(Not the senbei…)

The one with the brilliant smile sat across her.
He refused to sit with her because of the difference in social status, but he forcibly pinned down her shoulders.
Maomao winced. That overbearing action that was completely different to his gentle appearance.

“Teacher, I’m sorry but can you get this from the inside for me?”

Jinshi handed over a scrap of paper.
Even from afar, Maomao could see that a considerable number of ingredients written on it. It’ll take a while to collect.

The quack doctor squinted, and went into the inner room with a disappointed look.

(He planned to do that from the start)

“What do you really want to talk about?”

Maomao who was good at guessing, asked that as she rocked the teacup.

“Do you know about the ghost disturbance?”

“As far as rumours go.”

“Then, do you know about sleepwalking?

Jinshi did not miss the light that settled in the corner of Maomao's eyes.

With an evil laugh, there was evilness mixed in the celestial maiden's smile.

A large palm stroked Maomao's cheeks

"How would you go about curing that?"

He inquired, voice like sweet, sweet cider.

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Chapter 11: Ghost Disturbance (2)

“I know nothing about such things.”

Maomao replied, not wanting to over-guess herself. It wasn’t that she was being modest.

She knew what kind of illness it was, and she also seen patients with it.
That is why she said that.

“It’s not a disease you can cure with medicine.”

It is a neurosis.

When the brothel’s prostitutes were inflicted with this disease, her dad didn’t prescribe them any medicine.
It wasn’t something that can be cured with medicine after all.

“If there was medicine…”

what can cure it then? he asked.

“My expertise is drugs.”

Though she meant to declare it, from a fleeting glance in her peripheral, she saw the gloominess that suffused the heavenly face.

(Our eyes must not meet.)

She averted from the young man’s gaze as if she were handling a wild animal. She wasn’t able to avert the avert. He came around towards Maomao.

He’s quite persistent. He’s quite annoying.

“…I’ll make an effort.”

She replied with an extremely reluctant face.

The one who came by at midnight was the eunuch Gaoshun. Though she thought he was hard to get along with his quietness and his lack of expression, Maomao actually felt a wave of affinity towards him.

(He really doesn't feel like a eunuch type of person.)

It is common for eunuchs, having their physical yang parts removed to become more feminine.
Their body hair becomes thin, their personalities becomes calm, and in exchange of sexual desire, they gain appetites for food and become easy to put on weight.
The easiest to understand as an example was the quack doctor.

In the case of Gaoshun, while his hair wasn't dense, he was fearless so that if he was not in a place like the Inner Palace, he could be mistaken as a military officer.

(Why did he choose this path?)

She knew that this wasn't something she should ask even if she was curious. She clammed her mouth and shook her head.

Gaoshun led the way with a lantern in one hand.

It was a half moon, but it was bright with no clouds.
The inside of the palace she had only seen at noon was like a different place.

Sometimes, there were rustling sounds. She heard sounds of heavy breathing from the shade of the tree somehow, but she decided to ignore it.

Well, as the imperial court had no actual men aside from the emperor, it was inevitable that the shape of love was warped.

“Maomao-sama.”

Gaoshun spoke to her.

“I don’t need a title. Gaoshun-sama’s rank is higher.”

“Then, Shaomao.”

(Why are you suddenly adding *shao*?)

Maomao nodded, unexpectantly moved, while thinking, ‘this old man’.

“Would it be okay if you don’t look at Jinshi-sama like you would look at a pest?”

(It turns out, I’m exposed?)

Recently, her facial expressions were conspicuous, it seemed she couldn’t completely hide her impudence.
Though she thought her head wasn’t going to fly at present, she had to have self-restraint. For the Mr Big shot, it should be Maomao who would be the insect.

“Today as well, I go back and I get reported that ‘I’ve been looked at like a slug’.”

(Certainly, he is sticky, and I thought that his clinging was gross.)

Reporting everything is also sticky.

“He smiles with clouded eyes as he shudders. That would be what you call self-satisfaction, isn’t it.”

At the words born from a misunderstanding, she replied very seriously.
Rather, it was energy brought down from that garbage of an insect.

“…, I’ll pay attention from now on.”

“Indeed, because people without immunity can’t help but swoon

with one glance. It is troublesome to deal with it."

His hardships blurred with the deep sigh.

They arrived at the eastern gate as they were talking about their terrible hardship.
The castle walls were around the same height as Maomao's four walls. Outside was a deep moat and the bridge, for the transport of food supplies and materials, and sometimes, when maidservants were replaced, was lowered.

Escaping from the Inner Palace had the meaning of capital punishment.
The gate is always stationed with palace guards. The interior had two eunuchs, the exterior had two military officers. The gates were double; the guardroom could be entered from both the interior and exterior sides.

Two oxen were bred to raise and lower the drawbridge as human power was inadequate.

Maomao was driven with the urge to go look for things in the expansive pine forest, but with Gaoshun here, there was no way of that coming true, so she sat down in the gazebo in the garden.

It appeared there with the half-moon in the background.

The shadow of a white woman dancing in midair.

Clad in a long gown and a shawl, standing on the top of the castle walls, with a dancer's gait.

Clothing wavering, shawl undulating like a living thing. Her long black hair shone amid the darkness, the faint outlines of her figure stood out.

A beauty that can't be real.
As if she went astray from paradise, a wondrous spectacle.

"Fuyouunder the moon."

Suddenly, those words passed through her head.

Gaoshun looked surprised for an instant, and muttered to himself.

“She has good intuition.”

The woman’s name was “Fuyou”, a middle-ranked consort.
The princess to be bestowed for merit next month.

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Chapter 12: Ghost Disturbance (3)

Sleepwalking is a not properly understood disease.
Even though they are asleep, they move about as though they are awake.
If there was any cause to speak of, it would be the discord of the heart. No matter how much medicinal herbs are boiled, it is futile.

A certain prostitute was inflicted with that disease.
She was a cheerful woman who was good with poetry. The talk of redemption had come up.

However, that talk was broken off.
She strolled through the brothel every night as if she was possessed. When the prostitutes who were walking around and the madam tried to stop her, she gouged out their flesh with her nails.

The next day, everyone in the brothel kept their distance from her. What the prostitute said in her cheerful voice was this,

“Oh my. Everyone, what happened?”

The amnesiac woman’s bare feet were covered in dirt and cuts.

○●○

“What happened next?”

Jinshi and Maomao were in the living room. Gaoshun and Consort Gyokuyou were also there. The princess was entrusted to Honnyan.

“Nothing. When the talks of redemption died off, her wandering also stopped.”

Maomao said curtly.

“So you’re saying she hated the redeeming talk?”

“Probably. The other party was a large store owner but her social potion would be below the wife and children, and even after the grandchildren. Moreover, if she worked for another year, her term of service would be over.”

If she was redeemed by an person she didn’t like, it seemed that she would rather endure one more year of service. As a result, that prostitute had no more new talks of redeeming and was later freed from her service.

“As there are many who wander after they had extreme stress, you can give them a combination of calming drugs and scents, but, well, you only calm them down.”

Maomao had prescribed for these patients instead of her dad.

“Hmm.”

Jinshi rested his hands on his chin, looking amused.

“Is there anything after that?”

Towards the persistent gaze, she held back the contempt that was going to show on her face
Gaoshun wordlessly sent support beside her.

“After that I return to work, so excuse me.”

She bowed once and left the room.

Rewind a small amount of time.

The day after the ghost inspection, Maomao went to see Shaoran, the talkative girl from the east side.
As soon as Maomao met up with Shaoran, she was thoroughly asked about Consort Gyokuyou, so she got information about the ghost disturbance and old news in exchange.

The start of the ghost turmoil was some time before the half moon. The ghost was first sighted at the north side. After that, before long it became that she was sighted on the east side, and she could be seen every night.

The palace guards were scared of the ghost story, so they did nothing.
At present, there were no damages, so it seemed that no one tried to do anything about it.

What a bunch of useless guards.

The next place she went to was the quack doctor's place.
In a period where there was no such thing as personal information, the man who doesn't understand confidentiality will even talk to her about things she's never heard about.

About the recently unhappy Fuyou-hime.

She had the social status of one who attained the rank of high rank consort while being titled as a princess, the third one of a small vassal state that could scatter at a breath.

She had a building on the north side. She danced as a hobby but was timid and easily nervous. She failed when she had an audience with the emperor.

Excluding her dancing, there was nothing about her that stood out in particular. Two years after entering court, she had yet to be chosen.

This time, as she was bestowed to her childhood friend, a military officer, she would be finding happiness.

(I seeee.)

Maomao something linked in her head.
However, what would happen if she said something that didn't

come from the limits of speculation?

(Dad said that you shouldn't say things you guess.)

That's why she decided not to say it.

○●○

The docile, fair skinned princess passed through the central gates with flushed cheeks.
Although her looks didn't stand out, everyone lamented at the face that was bright with happiness.

She was thankful that she was bestowed this way.

That scene spread out.

○●○

"Isn't it fine to talk to me at least?"

Consort Gyokuyou, who smiled charmingly, was a mother of one child despite her actual age being not even twenty years old. She had a slight tomboyish smile.

Maomao pondered for a second.

"This is a guess at most. Also, I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"I'll hear it for myself. I won't get angry."

(Umm….)

"Not a word to anyone, then."

"My lips are sealed."

Maomao told her about the story of the sleep walking prostitute. It was different to the story she told before Jinshi and the others a couple of days ago, the story of another sleepwalker.

Similar to the prostitute from before, she got ill due to the redeeming talks that came up and became cancelled.

However, the sleepwalking didn't stop after that. Like last time, prescribing medicine didn't calm her down.
A new redeeming talk came up for that prostitute. The brothel owner couldn't bring themselves to allow an ill person to be redeemed, but even so, she wanted to be redeemed. Reluctantly, she was arranged to a contract that was half the amount of silvers of the previous redeeming talk.

"I understand what happened after, but isn't that fraud?"

"Fraud?"

The man from the previous redeeming talk was an acquaintance of the man who came afterwards. When he understood that the prostitute was faking her illness, he cancelled it. And then, the destined man redeemed her for half the amount.

"The prostitute still has a term of service left. The man's redeeming silver was not enough to pay for it."

"So you're saying these prostitutes were the same as Fuyou-hime?"

The childhood friend military officer didn't have the social position to propose to a princess of a vassal nation.
He had planned to come for the princess one day by rising up through feat of arms.

However, the princess was made to enter the Inner Palace due to politics. The princess, who thought of the military officer, failed at her specialty, dancing, so she wouldn't attract the attention of the emperor.
As she believed, for the period of two years without sleeping with anyone, she kept her body clean.

The childhood friend collected his feat of arms and when Fuyou-hime became bestowed to him at his next merit, the princess came to wander about questionably.
No matter what happens, so that the emperor wouldn't think it regrettable for Fuyou-hime, so that she doesn't become chosen.

If she became chosen, the bestowing will become after. Also, to the Fuyou-hime who prized her maidenhood, it would be that she can't face her childhood friend on the occasion she sleeps with him.

She was dancing at the east gate was for the sake of prayers to her childhood friend who was coming back for her. The sake of a prayer so he comes back unharmed.

"It's fraud to the end."

"How do I say this. It might be the case concerning the emperor, so you can't say anything."

The Favoured Consort looked slightly troubled.
She was unable to say that the lustful emperor didn't hold any interest to the princess who desired the military officer to that extent.

"If I say that I'm jealous of Fuyou-hime, I might be a cruel woman."

"I don't think that."

Though she thought the theory was mostly coherent, she didn't feel like telling Jinshi.
Because one must be happy.

She wanted to keep that tender, simple smile as it is.

It seemed that the problem was completely solved but….

There is actually still one mystery remaining.

“How did she go up?”

Maomao tilted her head, looking up at the wall that was on all her four sides.

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Chapter 13: Intimidation

There were the sounds of something falling with a crash.
The tuber and grain porridge, tea, and grated fruit went everywhere.

“Did you think to serve Rifa-sama this kind of peasant food? Make it all over again.”

The corners of the court lady’s eyes were raised. She is one of the lady’s maid attached to Consort Rifa, a young woman with a face of gaudy make-up.

(Ahh, what a pain.)

She cleaned up the fallen food and picked up the plates while heaving a sigh.

Maomao was at the Crystal Palace.
Consort Rifa’s residence.

She was surrounded by a great number of glares.
There were looks of ridicule, scorn, and bare animosity.

As a maid who served Consort Gyokuyou, this place was just like enemy territory.
She was standing on a bed of nails.

It was when the emperor appeared at Consort Gyokuyou’s place last night.
She had tasted for poison as usual and was planning to leave the room.

“I have a request for the doctor from the rumours.”

She was called for the first time.

(What is this rumour you’re speaking of?)

The emperor's age was somewhere around the mid-thirties, a great man growing a beautiful beard. The one who holds the highest authority in the country, it was no wonder and couldn't be helped that Maomao was glared at by the court ladies. She just thought, "I want to try touching his long beard".

"What will it be?"

She respectfully lowered her head. It was just as she wanted to leave before taking a humble correspondence with a maidservant's social position.

"Consort Rifa's condition is bad. Will you look at her for me for a while?"

That.

The emperor's words were the heaven's word.
Maomao, who wanted her head and body to remain close with each other, had no choice but to reply with "Your pleasure."

'*Look after he*r" had the same meaning as "*Cure her*".

Be that as it may that his favour for her was gone, it could either be that affection remained to some extent, or it could also be that he couldn't disregard the daughter of an influential person.
If Maomao can't cure her, her head will fly.
Their lives were linked.

As he was entrusting this to a young girl, it is at best due to the reason that the inner palace medical officers were usually unreliable, or that there was no issue with her dying. Either way, it was an irresponsible request.

(At any rate, it's not something you talk about in front of another consort.)

Maomao, taking up such a request, ate her dinner leisurely and deeply thought that the emperor was as she thought what an emperor would be like, to perform friendly things with Consort Gyokuyou.

The first thing she should do when she sees Consort Rifa is to improve her eating habits.

At present within the Inner Palace, due to Jinshi's words, the poisonous face powder was not allowed to be used. If merchants were found to sell it, they would be thoroughly punished cruelly.

If that's the case, then getting rid of the poison that is left in her body was the first priority.

Although the meal was served with porridge, it was an extravagant affair with fried fish with ankake broth, stewed pork, and red and white steamed bun with shark fin and crab. It was nutritious, but overly heavy for a sick person with a weak stomach.

She ordered the cook to redo it while trying not to drool herself. With the imperial command, Maomao, who gave off the air of a humble maidservant, was able to maintain authority.

The meal consisted of porridge high in fibre, tea with a diuretic effect, and easily digestible fruit.

It was regrettable that it was thrown on the floor some time ago.

Other than criticising the imperial command, the maids weren't pleased with the ugly maidservant who serves Consort Gyokuyou. Maomao had a lot of things she wanted to say, but she firmly put up with it and cleaned up.

A lady's maid brought in another luxurious and gorgeous meal, and carried it towards Consort Rifa, but a short time later most hands left without cleaning up. The remainders became the reward for the lowly maidservants.

Just as she wanted to perform palpation, the lady's maids shadowed her around the canopied bed, and so she nursed her,

completely failing to be respectful. When the powder on the sleeping place was slapped, she only coughed once,

“Because there’s a peasant here. The air is bad.”

And was driven out of the room.
The chances of her getting cured were low.

(She will certainly waste away if it keeps up like that.)

It could either be that her body couldn’t eject the over-accumulated poison in time, or that she will not have enough vitality.
If you take away food, a person will die. They lose the energy to live.

She leaned against the wall in front of the room. Until the day her head separates from her body, she will count the days with her fingers. As she thought that, she heard a lovely voice from her surroundings.

She had an extremely unpleasant sensation and looking up with an extremely serious face, she saw an extremely lovely face smiling extremely cheerfully. [T/N: lol]

“You looked troubled by something.”

“Do I look like that?”

She replied monotonously with her eyes narrowed.

“You do look like that.”

He was staring intently at her, so her gaze gradually strayed. His long eyelashes neared as he attempted to follow.
If their eyes met, she would look at him as though she was touching garbage, a conditioned reflex.

“What’s with that girl?”

She heard malicious whispering. It was the maidservant who dismissed the meals.
Maomao really felt like running away. The air around her became terrible.

A sweet, honey voice spoke close to her ears.

“Let’s enter for the time being.”

Before she nodded, they shut themselves into the room.

As she entered, the followers in the room glared at her even more grimly than just then.
But when they gazed at the one with the look of a celestial maiden next to her, those looks subsided into light smiles.

Women are really scary.

“Taking out the person the emperor arranged is not becoming of beautiful, talented women.”

She bit her lip at Jinshi’s words, and softly retreated from the front of the bed.

“Now, go.”

With a push from her back, Maomao pitched forward.

With a bow, she stood in front of the bed, and took hold of the pale hand with light veins.
She also had experience in things to do with being a doctor, not just medicine.

Consort Rifa’s eyes were closed, she did not resist. Maomao didn’t know if she was sleeping or awake. Half her soul had already flowed to the other world.

To look under the eyelids, she hung her fingers on the consort’s face.
Her fingers slipped at the feel of the smoothness.

Her skin was pure white, not different from before.

(The same skin colour as before?)

Maomao's face stiffened. She turned towards the maids.
She stood before one of them among them, and asked in low, stifling voice. It was the girl who slapped the powder some time ago.

"The one who applied the make-up on the consort, was it you?"

"Yes, that's right. It is the duty worthy of a maid after all."

As Maomao stared into her, the maid answered while panicking in some way. She was bluffing with all her might.

"I want Rifa-sama to be always beautiful."

As if to say she was right.

"I see."

There was a loud slap.

The maid collapsed, her strength leaving her, having no idea what just happened.
Maomao's cheeks and ears were strangely hot.

"What are you doing!"

Amid the dumbfounded group, one person flared up on Maomao.

"Hah? I'm just disciplining a fool."

Speaking in that disdainful way, she grabbed the collapsed maid by the hair and dragged her along.
She stopped the front of the dressing table, emptying her hands and reached for the engraved container.
Opened the lid, covered the maid with its contents.

She coughed violently. Her eyes teared up.

“Isn’t that great. With this, you’ll be pretty like the consort.”

Pulling up the maid’s hair, she smiled like a beast that hunted its game.

“The poisonous essence passes through the whole body, from the pores, the mouth, the nose. You will acquire hands like withered branches, sunken eye sockets, skin that has lost its complexion, just like the Rifa-sama you adore.”

“N, no way….”

“Why? Didn’t you know it was forbidden? They even told you it was poison!!”

“B,but. It’s the most beautiful. We thought Rifa-sama would be happy.”

“Who would be happy with a poison that gives them a revenant’s death.”

Like she was speaking to a child, Maomao clicked her tongue and released her hold from the maid’s hair. Several strands of long hair remained on her fingers.

“Hurry up, go rinse your mouth. Go wash your face too.”

After she saw off the court lady who scrambled out of the room in haste, she then looked at the other frightened maids.

“Oi, at this rate, you’re touching a sick person. Hurry up and clean.”

She pointed at the shelves she scattered and the powder covered bed.
The maids trembled in fright and came back with cleaning equipment.

She crossed her arms and let out a huff.

“Women are really scary.”

Both hands in his sleeves, Jinshi muttered to himself.
She forgot about his existence.

“Ah.”

Maomao suddenly felt her blood rushing from her head, and crouched down at that spot.

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Chapter 14: Nursing

Consort Rifa's condition was worse than she thought. Although the cereal porridge was remade into a thin rice gruel, there was no indication of her slurping from a spoon. Maomao had to prise open her mouth and slowly pour it in to make her swallow.

She couldn't take in food. That was the biggest issue. She had to be patiently and insistently fed.

When Maomao went to ventilate the room, the clogging fragrance subsided and was replaced by the smell of a sick person. They probably burned incense to hide the scent of body odour. It didn't seem like that the consort had bathed for a couple of days. Maomao's resentment for the useless maids grew.

The discipline seemed to have got through to the maids she chastised. The stock of the face powder had been snuck in. Pitifully, the one who got whipped was the eunuch who failed to collect the face powder. Punishment was also influenced by their birth.

Although Maomao glared at the supervising eunuch with contempt as if to call him "incompetent thing", she felt that it wouldn't accomplish anything.

She prepared a pail and a cloth, and together with the maids she summoned, wiped the consort down. The maids had looked at her in disapproval, but became docile when Maomao glared at them.

Her skin was dry, lips were painfully cracked from the lack of hydration. She coated her lips with honey instead of rouge, and tied her hair up simply.

Afterwards, she made her drink tea with every opportunity. Sometimes, she gave her watered down broth instead of tea. The number of times she urinated increased.

Though Maomao thought she would be aimed with hostility, being the questionable newcomer, the doll-like Consort Rifa generally obediently listened to her. It might be that her blank eyes didn't recognise who was who.

She increased the amount of the thin rice gruel from half a bowl to one bowl all at once, and little by little, increased the amount of rice used to make it. So that she could start to swallow on her own without being needed to be held up by the chin, Maomao increased the servings of soup steeped with the flavour of meat, and pureed fruit.

Consort Rifa's lips suddenly moved when she could go to relieve herself without help.

"Why ca…, let m…."

To pick up the words that were leaked out, she stood next to Consort Rifa.

"Why can't you, let me die like this?"

She spoke in a soft, vanishing voice.

Maomao raised her eyebrows.

"Then, I'll take away your meals. That you're eating the porridge, means that you don't want to die, right?"

Saying that, she held the warmed tea against Consort Rifa's mouth.

With an audible swallow,

"Is that so…."

A broken smile escaped.

The responses the maids gave towards Maomao could be split into two groups.
The ones afraid of her, and the ones who opposed her while being afraid her.

(Did I overdo it?)

It couldn't be helped, she thought. She had a bad habit of over-reacting whenever her emotions pass her boiling point.

Although unsociable, Maomao was generally easy-going. She was plainly hurt by the being looked at from a distance like she was demon or ogre.

In this case, it couldn't be helped as she needed to nurse Consort Rifa.

She didn't know anything if it was the emperor or Consort Gyokuyou's command, the sparkling Jinshi-dono frequently appeared for her. With his authority to use anything that could be used, a bathroom was constructed at top speed for her at the Crystal Palace. In addition to the bathroom that was there originally, they made a sauna.

"I don't have a need for you anymore, so go away already", Maomao told him in her roundabout way, but Jinshi, who Maomao handled like a monster, came smiling at every opportunity.

He's a eunuch with too much free time.

She wanted him to to learn from observing Gaoshun who comes over each time with a box of snacks for her.
He could become a good husband with that sort of diligence. But he's a eunuch.

She took in fibre and hydration to sweat and promote bowel movement.

While thinking just about eliminating the poison from her body, two months have passed, until Consort Rifa was able to go out for a walk by herself.
From the start, the weakness from the nervous breakdown was serious. It should be a non-issue if she didn't newly take in poison. It will take time to recover her voluptuous body from before, but the redness had returned to her cheeks, and she is no longer hovering over the brink of death.

The night before she returned to the Jade palace, Maomao went to Consort Rifa's place to greet her.

Maomao had expected to be slandered as a peasant if the consort's conscious was clear, but it wasn't the case.
There was conceit, but there wasn't arrogance. The thing about the crown prince had made her imagine her an unpleasant young lady, but in truth she had the appropriate personality of an empress.

"Well then, you will be excused tomorrow morning."

She planned to leave the room after explaining to her about her medical diet here on after and various other important points when,

"Hey, can I no longer give birth?"

She spoke in a flat voice.

"I don't know. You won't know unless you try."

"Even though I lost the emperor's favour?"

What she was trying to say was understandable enough.
From the start, her being blessed with the crown prince was because she slept with the emperor to obstruct the Favoured Consort, Consort Gyokuyou.
The births of the princess and the crown prince being three months apart was truly talked about.

“I was commanded to come here by the emperor. After I go back, it doesn’t mean that the emperor would also come to Rifa-sama’s place.”

That was not a question even if it was political or emotional.
The way it was done was the same.

“Were you thinking of winning against her? A woman who didn’t listen to Consort Gyokuyou’s words and killed her own child before her very eyes.”

“I think whether I win or not isn’t an issue. Also, mistakes are something you learn from.”

Maomao took hold of a single-flower vase that decorated the wall. It was adorned with a blooming star-shaped flower, a Chinese Bellflower.

“The world has a hundred, a thousand flowers. If you must pick between the peony and the iris, I think the most beautiful one is the one you’re fixed on, is it not?”

“I don’t have the barbarian princess’ jade eyes and pale hair.”

“If you have other things, then there’s no issue.”

Saying that, Maomao’s gaze wandered down from Consort Rifa’s face.
Normally, it is said that is the part where you lose weight from first, but she had two proper sized melons on her chest.

“It was just the size of these that I have from the start. And my slender figure as my pride.”

For Maomao, who gained a discerning eye from the brothel, she was certain. It was a secret that she was fascinated every time she was made to bath.
As one who served Consort Gyokuyou, although there wasn’t a way

for her support Consort Rifa, she decided to give her one last present.

“Can you lend me your ears for a bit?”

Mumbling so that no one around them could hear, she taught Consort Rifa a certain thing.

It is a secret art “no loss to memorise” of the ladies of the red-light district.

Among the maids, it became a topic of discussion of for some time, about what Consort Rifa, whose face had turned as red as an apple, had heard.

Afterwards, at the Jade Palace, the emperor’s visits decreased to a record low.

“Fuu, I have been released from my lack of sleep.”

At those words, laced with cynicism at what Consort Gyokuyou said, Maomao’s wandering eyes were yet another story.

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Chapter 15: Flame

(They really are growing here.)

She made a joyful look, holding the laundry basket in one hand.

There was red pine growing in the pine forest near the east gate. The Inner Palace was generally vigilant in the control of the garden. Also, the pine forest drops its dead branches and leaves once a year, which creates the ideal conditions for the growth of a certain mushroom.

What she was holding onto was the rare mushroom with the spreading conical cap, the *matsutake*.
While there are people that dislike its scent, it was Maomao's favourite food. She greatly enjoyed cutting it up into four, grilling on a mesh, and eating it with salt and squeezed citrus.

It was small forest, but as they are often found growing in groups, her basket had five *matsutake* mushrooms inside.

(Shall I eat it at Occhan'splace? Or shall I eat it in the kitchen?)

If she were to eat at the Jade Palace, she might be asked about the source of the ingredients. Things like harvesting things from the forest, might just be something a court lady shouldn't do.

And so, she headed for the soft-hearted medical officer who was a good person but useless at his job. If he liked the mushroom, then it's good. And even if he hated it, he will overlook it for her.

Along the way, she also didn't forget to stop by Shaoran's place. She was a precious source of information for Maomao who didn't have much friends.

Maomoa, who lost weight from nursing Consort Rifa, was made fat again by her senior maids when she returned. Because she was

at the rival consort's place for two months, she was both happy and troubled about it. Her basket would be unmanageably full of the mooncakes and biscuits she received from every tea party.

Shaoran's eyes always shone at no matter how much sweet stuff she ate and she would always talk to Maomao during her short breaks.

As usual, there were a lot of stories that sound like questionable ghost stories but,

"An Imperial Court court lady used a love potion and ensnared the misogynist stubborn military officer."

Somehow, she broke into cold sweat when she heard the fresh gossip.

(Yeah, that probably has nothing to do with me. Probably.)

Come to think of it, she had a feeling that she heard nothing at all about who was using it.

The Imperial Court was inside the Royal Court that was outside of here.

It was the section with actual men. A place with a high ratio of star occupations.

By the way, here is the section without actual men. A lonely workplace.

At the medical office, besides the loach moustache old man was a pale-faced eunuch she was not familiar with.
He kept rubbing his hands for some reason.

"Oh hey, lass. Just as I wanted to see you."

"What is it?"

"It looks like his hands have developed a rash. Can you make a salve for me?"

In no way were those the words of someone who controls the medicine of Inner Palace.
Well, as it's the usual, she went to the room with the medicine shelves next door.

Before that, she set the basket down and took out the matsutake.

"Do you have charcoal and stuff like that?"

"Ohh, you brought some splendid things. It would be good if we have *hishiosoy paste* and salt."

The talk about favourite foods was early. With a merry bounce in his steps, he went for the dining hall to pick up some seasoning for her.

Pathetically leaving behind his patient as he is.

(I'll give him one if he doesn't hate it.)

She thought about the poor eunuch as she stiffly mixed the ingredients.

When the quack doctor came back with the seasoning, charcoal and grill mesh, she was just finished with making the viscous salve.

Taking hold of the eunuch's right hand, she carefully smeared the salve onto the red rash. Had to endure the smell, as it was somewhat strong.
His pale face seemed to have returned for a bit when she finished applying the medicine.

"Ohhh, what a kind maidservant."

"I know right. She oft helps me."

The two eunuchs conversed without a care.
Eunuchs, according to the times, are treated like bad people who are filled with a lust for power, but in truth those were only a small handful. Most of them have calm personalities like this.

(But there are exceptions.)

She made an unpleasant face and promptly erased it.

She set the charcoal on fire, placed the mesh and added the *matsutake* she picked by hand. She cut the *sudachi*that she had wilfully stolen from the orchard again.

She served it on a plate once the peculiar fragrance reached her nose and they were a little charred. She then enjoyed it seasoned with salt and *sudachi*.

The moment the two old men placed it in their mouths, she determined them as accomplices.

As Maomao chewed, the quack doctor was chatting in a carefree manner.

“The lass is helpful because she can do anything. She made a lot of medicine aside from the salves for me.”

“Hoooh, how wonderful.”

She was somewhat troubled by the fact that he was treating her as if she was his own daughter.
Suddenly, she was reminded of her dad who she hadn’t seen for more than half a year.

A tiny bit unsettled by the strong feelings, the quack doctor really said the improper things that a quack doctor would say.

“Ahh, there aren’t medicines you can’t make, right?”

(Huh?)

Before she told him to stop with the false advertising, the eunuch before her eyes made a reaction.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

The quack doctor blew out of his nose in pride. Ahh, it’s the way the quack doctor did things.

“Then, can you make medicine that can break curses?”

The man said that while rubbing his inflamed right hand.
Colour had returned to his pale face some time ago.

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It was something from the evening of yesterday.
His work ends with cleaning up the rubbish as usual.

Rubbish from all over the inner palace is collected in a cart and incinerated on the west side.
It was originally forbidden to light a fire after the evenings, but since there was no wind and the air was damp, it was approved with no issues.

The low ranked officials threw the rubbish into the hole.
He devoted himself like the others so he could quickly finish his job.

Suddenly, something in the cart caught his eye.

A woman’s clothing.
Though it wasn’t silk, it was of fine quality. It would be a waste to throw it out.

When he held it up, thinking, W*hat’s the deal with this?*, he saw that there were loose wooden slips bundled up inside it.
There was a large scorch mark on the cuff on the clothing that wrapped it.

Just what is this all about?

The work would not end even if he held his head in doubt.
The wooden slips were picked out one by one and thrown into the fire in the hole.

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“And in doing so, it was said that the flames blew up into a gust and changed into a weird colour.”

“Ahh.”

The old man’s shoulders trembled, looking dreadful at his recall.

“Were the colours red, purple and green?”

“That’s right.”

Maomao nodded in understanding.
Did the rumour she heard from Shaoran today come from here?

(It’s already spread to here even though it’s a talk from the west side?)

It is true that the court ladies’ rumours travel faster than *Idaten*.

“That is the curse of the consort who died in a fire a long time ago. I knew that it was wrong to light a fire at night. That’s why it turned out like this.”

It seemed that the eunuch’s hand rash was from after seeing that flame.

“Hey, girl. Make me a medicine that breaks the curse.”

“That sort of medicine doesn’t exist.”

Declaring that coldly, she stood up from her seat and went to

rummage at the medicine shelves next door.

Giving a backwards glance at the flustered quack doctor and the old man, she put something on the table. There were several powders, and then bits and pieces of wooden slips.

“That flame. Was it this colour?”

She added the wooden slips onto the charcoals, and after confirming that they were lit, she scooped up some white powder with a medicine spoon and added it to the fire.
The orange fire turned red.

“If not then, this.”

When she added a different powder, it became green.

“You can do even this.”

When she added a pinch of salt that was stuck to the *matsutake*, it turned yellow.

“Lass, what in the world is that?”

The quack doctor asked, looking astonished.

“It’s the same as coloured fireworks. Just that the colour changes according to what is burnt.”

There were firework makers among the guests of the *roukaku*. A secret technique that stays within the premises even change as talk inside the sleeping quarters. They also didn’t know about the children next door waking up from their sleep.

“Then, what is this hand? Is it not a curse?”

Maomao held out the white powder.

“A rash can break out if you touch this with your bare hands. If it

wasn't for that, they wouldn't paint lacquer onto the wooden slips. Either way, isn't your skin weak to these?"

"…is that so?"

He sat down tiredly, as if he lost his bones. His face was a mix of surprise and relief.

It was adhered to the wooden slips, burning that will birth colourful flames.
That was all it was.

(Why is it again just that kind of thing.)

Maomao's thoughts were interrupted.
She heard clapping.

"Well done."

There was a detestable guest standing there unnoticed.
He was smiling with that unchanging heavenly smile.

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Chapter 16: Secret Manoeuvres

The place Jinshi led her to was the Palace Official Chief's room. The middle-aged court lady withdrew from the room with Jinshi's directions.

She honestly wanted to say. It was completely impossible to be alone in the same room as this living being.

Even Maomao didn't hate pretty things.
It's just that she couldn't forgive that he is excessively pretty, she felt that tiny flaw was like a sin. It was just like a polished gem with just a hairline fracture having its value halved.

That is why whenever she interacts with him, she ends up looking at him like an insect that crawls on the ground.
There was nothing she could do about it.

(I want to interact with him like he is someone to appreciate.)

This was the lower middle class Maomao's real intention.

She was relieved when Gaoshun came in to replace the court lady.
Recently, the taciturn attendant was in the process of becoming the healing type.

"How many colours are there for these?"

He lined up the powders taken from the medical office.

"There's red, yellow, blue, purple, and green. If you make a fine distinction, there are more. I don't know the specific number."

"Then, what can we do about those colours on the wooden slips?"

It was impossible to strike it when it was in the form of powder. It will be weird whatever the circumstances.

“If it’s salt, it can only be added to salt water. I think this too can be done the same way.”

She put away the white powder.

“The other ones look like they can be removed with something other than water. This too, is outside my expertise, so I don’t know.”

“It’s good enough.”

The young man crossed in arms, deep in thought.
Just this would paint a picture.

She knew that Jinshi seized various things from inside the Inner Palace.
The things Maomao said just now have become the basis for something, it seems the scattered pieces of information was becoming connected in his head.

(A cipher…I wonder?)

The answer she reached would likely be the same. However, Maomao repeatedly acknowledged that it should not be said.

The pheasant would not be shot but for its cries.

As she would not be needed beyond this, she was going to leave,

“Wait.”

She was called to a halt.

“What do you require?”

“I like *dobin mushi*.”

There was no need to say, “of what?”

(I just knew I've been caught.)

Dropping her shoulders,

"I'll go look for some tomorrow as well."

She told him.

○●○

When he affirmed that the door closed with a click, Jinshi stopped his sweet, honey smile. Instead, his gaze became crystal sharp.

"Look for people who have recently bore burns on their arm. For the time being, investigate the ones with rooms and upwards, and their attached lady's maids as well."

"By your will."

When Gaoshun withdrew, the Palace Official Chief entered.

"Thank you very much. For always lending me your place."

"T,there's no problem."

She blushed in spite of her age.

Jinshi was again smiling, expression like heavenly nectar.

Nevertheless, he should be like this to women.

For only just a moment his lips pursed, and he left the room, the smile back to the usual.

○●○

"Okay, try wearing this."

Infa, her maid senior, held out brand-new clothes to Maomao. The colours were unbleached white for the tunic, pale red for the

skirt and the sleeves were a pale yellow, and reached out larger than usual.
Though it wasn't silk, it was made from high quality cotton.

"What is, this?"

Though the colours were appropriately plain for a maidservant, it wasn't a design for practical use. Furthermore, they were clothes that opened up widely at the breast area, Maomao having never worn such clothes, made a clearly reluctant expression.

"What, you say. It's the outfit for the Garden Party."

"The Garden Party?"

Maomao, who was completely doted upon her maid senior's favour, besides tasting for poison and making medicine every day, ran about outside harvesting medicinal plants, chattered with Shaoran and had tea at the medical office. Therefore, she had heard little about the topic of the elite.

Infa, with a look of amazement, informed Maomao, who tilted her head.

About the opening of high society at the imperial court garden twice a year.
The emperor, who doesn't have an empress, will bring along Primary First Class Consorts. The court ladies who serve those consorts will also accompany.

In the Inner Palace, Consort Gyokuyou was crowned the "Noble Consort", and Consort Rifa the "Able Consort."
Aside from those two, including the "Virtuous Consort" and the "Pure Consort", they are the Four Consorts. They make up the Primary First Rank.

Originally, only the "Virtuous Consort" and the "Pure Consort" was supposed to attend the Winter Garden Party. However, as Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa were absent last time due to having just given birth, it was made that all of them will attend this

time.

“All of them attend, you say?”

“Indeed, we’d better be mindful.”

That was the reason for Infa’s pride.
Even at the best of times, on top of the rare chance to go outside the Inner Palace, it was a loaded event with Princess Rinrii’s debut and the high-ranked Consorts appearing together.

For the sake of Consort Gyokuyou, who had few maids, Maomao had no way of turning it down for reasons of being unaccustomed to it. She knew that a food taster would be highly regarded, especially for that sort of public location.

(Bloodshed might happen.)

Maomao’s intuition hit the mark.
She hit the troubling matter.

“It would be better if we padded the breast area a little. Would it be okay if we also enlarge the butt area?”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

Infa, tightening the belt with a squeeze, adjusting the height of the skirt and length of the sleeves, again moved in with a finishing blow.

“You should properly put on make-up too. You should occasionally put in some effort in hiding your freckles.”

It goes without saying she returned a stiff smile to Infa, who was grinning widely.

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Chapter 17: Garden Party Preparations

Maomao was disheartened from hearing the course of the events of the Garden Party from Honnyan.

The woman attended last year's Spring Garden Party,

"Even though I was relieved there wouldn't be one this year."

Honnyan said with an affected sigh.

There was nothing they could do there. Just standing there was fine.
In the end, all a consort has to do from a guest's perspective is to accompany the emperor. Their maids would do the same.

It was good to just view programs from military exercises to dance performances, and poetry recitals to *erhu*performances, eat served meals, and turn around smiling at officials who greet at appropriate times.

In the outdoors with the cold, dry wind blowing.

The garden was, well, pointlessly wide as if it was proportionate to the emperor's power.
It will require four hours if you want to go out to wash your hands for a bit.

If the emperor, the guest of honour, decides to remain in his seat, the consorts would have no choice but to follow suit.

(You'll need bladders of steel.)

Instead of going to the Garden Party at the beginning of Spring, she wondered what Winter would be like.

Therefore, Maomao got underwear with many pockets so she could fit heated stoneshand-warmers in them. Also she made a

candy from boiling fruit juice, sugar and finely shaved ginger and orange peel.

When she showed Honnyan the underwear and the candy, she was requested, with clouded eyes, to make a portion for everyone.

In the middle of making them, the leisurely eunuch came by and told her to make some for him too.
His attendant looked like he wanted to say something, so she reluctantly made another one for him as well.

Again, during the night visit, it seemed that Consort Gyokuyou told the emperor, and the next day, the emperor's personal seamstress and the one in charge of his meals came by to learn how to make it.

Indeed, it was quite a penance.

Thanks to that, it wasn't until the Garden Party when her side job finished.
As it was last night when she was finally freed up from work, she decided to make medicine from the medicinal herbs she had on hand.

"You look beautiful, Gyokuyou-sama."

What Infa and them said wasn't flattery.

(As expected, only the one called the Favoured Consort can pull this off.)

The consort, who drifted with the air of a foreign country, wore a red skirt and a light crimson outfit. The large sleeves she wore on top were the same red with golden embroidery. Her hair was tied up with two large rings, with two flower *kanzashi*and a crown placed right on the centre. The flower *kanzashi* was a long silver hairpin, and the ends dangled with a decorative red silk tassel and jade gem.

The reason these clothes have never been worn despite the showy design, was because of Consort Gyokuyou.
The consort, with burning red hair, was said to be the person who suited red the most. Also, her glittering jade coloured eyes within the red also harboured a mysterious air about her.

Maomao and others who wore red outfits to signify that they follow her.

They wore matching sets and tied up their hair.

Consort Gyokuyou, for her troubles, brought along a jewellery box from her own dresser.
There was a necklace and earrings set with jade, and a *kanzashi* inside.

“Because you are my maids. So you are free from strange bugs, we will have to attach these to let people know you belong to me.”

Saying that, she respectively decorated their hair, ears and neck. Maomao was given the jade necklace to wear.

“Thank you very m—-“

(Eek!)

Before she could finish saying her thanks, her arms were pinned to her back.
Infa firmly twisted her arms.

“Well then, it’s time for make-up.”

Honnyan was grinning with a paintbrush in hand. The other two maids were each holding onto a clam with rouge inside and a writing brush respectively.

It was here when she forgot to put up a storm about getting her face made up by her senior maids.

“Ufufu, make her cute.”

Consort Gyokuyou laughed, her voice pleasant like a bell. It turns out there was another accomplice here.

Maomao, who couldn't conceal her trembling, was under the mercy of the four maids.

"First, we should wipe her face and paint the perfumed oil."

They roughly wiped Maomao's face with a damp cloth.

""Huh?""

(Uhhh…)

The maids collectively made a sound of surprise as they compared her face to the damp cloth.

(I've been exposed.)

She will say one thing here.
The reason that Maomao hated make-up wasn't because she hated make-up. It wasn't that she was bad at it.
Rather, between a strength and a weakness, it was more along the lines of it being her strength.

If that's the case, then it could be assuredly said that her face was already made up.

There were light brown stains on the damp cloth.

The face that everyone thought was clear of make-up, was actually a face after make-up.

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Chapter 18: Make-up

As there was still a short time before the Garden Party begins, Consort Gyokuyou and the maids went to pass the time at the garden's gazebo.

Rainbow carp splashed in the lake, and the few remaining autumn leaves dyed in red scattered through the air.

"All this was thanks to you."

Though there was enough sunlight, the winds were cold and harsh. Normally, they would be shivering in the cold, but because of the underwear with the pocket warmers, no one suffered to that extent.
Even Princess Rinrii, who everyone was worried about, was curled up in a ball inside the basket. Heated stones just like what they had were inside the basket with her.

"As you can get low temperature burns, when you remove the Princess' heated stone(hand-warmers) occasionally, please wrap it with a cloth when you replace it. Also, please take note of any stinging in the mouth if you eat too much of the candy."

Maomao placed the replacement heated stone inside the hand-basket. The princess' diapers and change of clothes were also inside. The brazier to warm the heated stones was already requested and brought in by a eunuch.

"I understand. That saying,"

An impish giggle leaked out. The other maids were also smiling wryly.

"You are my maid after all."

Saying that, she pointed at the jade necklace.

“That is certainly true.”

Maomao decided to capture the moment of those words.

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Gaoshun gazed at his master who was inquiring about the Virtuous Consort’s mood.

Jinshi, who had heavenly nectar and a celestial maiden’s smile, was more bewitching that the Virtuous Consort, who was admired as a beauty in spite of being young.
The consort, clad in luxurious and gorgeous clothing, her hair adorned with a silver *kanzashi*, could only be overshadowed before the ordinary plain official robes with some embroidery.

Having come this far, he was a disagreeable existence, but seeing how the overshadowed consort herself was entranced, her eyes glazed, it didn’t seem to be an issue.

What a sinful human.

After visiting the three consorts, they headed towards Consort Gyokuyou’s place next.
They found them at the gazebo in the direction of the lake.

Though Jinshi had equal contact with the Four Consorts, nothing could be done lately about Consort Gyokuyou’s strong backing. Well, as far as she was called the Emperor’s Favoured Consort, it shouldn’t be viewed as a problem, but it was clear that there were other reasons to it too.

He bowed to the consort. Praised her well-fitting red outfit. Certainly, she was fittingly beautiful. The Barbarian Princess’ mysteriousness and her natural fascinating elegance was saturated in the air about her as well.

It was likely that, in regard to the brilliance inside the Inner

Palace, the person who could be favourably compared to Jinshi is Consort Gyokuyou.

While it may be true, it wasn't that the court ladies around him were not beautiful. It's just that each one of them paled in comparison to his personal charm.
The amazing part of Jinshi was that he could say that precisely. Everyone had parts of themselves they were pleased with that they want to be admired by others. That was aptly reached.

Jinshi does not lie.
It's just that he doesn't speak the truth.

He feigned serenity, but the left corner of his lips were slightly raised. As his attendant, who served him for many years, he understood. It was an expression a child would make in front of a toy. How troubling.

Pretending to look at the princess' face, he approached the short maid.

But.

Standing there with expressionlessly, looking down somewhere while making an excessively disrespectful face, was an unfamiliar maid.

○●○

"Pleasant day to you, Jinshi-sama."

She was careful to not let her 'Here again, you leisurely rascal?' expression come out.
As Gaoshun was watching, she wanted to be gentle as much as she could.

"Are you wearing make-up?"

"No, I'm not."

She wasn't wearing any make-up aside from the rouge on her lips and the corner of her eyes.
There were still some light spots around her nose, but she didn't mind it.

"Your freckles are erased."

"Indeed, because I erased them."

What remained was a tattoo she gave herself by stabbing with a needle a long time ago. Without stabbing deeply, the pale dye will disappear within a year.
Although, since the act was the same as a criminal's punishment, even if it does disappear, her dad had indicated his disapproval.

"You erased it with make-up, didn't you?"

"I erased it when I removed the make-up."

(Ahh, I should've just said 'yeah sure' at the right time…)

Maomao noticed too late that she made a mistake in her reply.

"What you said is strange. There's a contradiction."

"No. There is no such thing."

Make-up isn't just used to beautify. There were also cases where middle-aged women specifically used make-up to make themselves look unattractive.

The product made of dried clay and mixed with dye, Maomao applied around her nose every day. She skillfully obscured the tattooed freckles by turning it into spots. What she did was by no means unintentional; it was that no one noticed it.

A woman with freckles and spots, with a face that doesn't particularly stand out.

That was why she was called a plain-looking woman.

To put it another way, if she didn't have the freckles and spots, her face would just be said as uncharacteristic, in other words, an average, neat face.
With even a little bit of rouge, she can change the atmosphere. The ordinary-looking Maomao can look completely different.

Jinshi clutched his head at Maomao's explanation, as if he somehow couldn't understand her.

"Why would you do that kind of make-up? Is there any meaning to it?"

"Yes. It is so I won't be taken into the back alleys."

The prostitution quarter – being what it is – had those who hungered for women. Most of those guys don't have money, they are violent, and mental illness was common among them.
Of course, she would want to excuse herself from that.

The flabbergasted Jinshi, for some reason, timidly asked her.

"Have you ever been taken?"

"They tried."

So he could understand what she said, she glared at him with narrowed eyes.

"Instead I have been kidnapped by human traffickers."

It was better for the women disposed at the Inner Palace to have good looks. In those time, she would go out to harvest the medicinal herbs for the dyes of her faded tattoo, accidentally forgetting her make-up.

"I'm sorry. The management wasn't thorough."

“It’s fine. There isn’t much distinction between selling someone as kidnappers and selling someone to reduce the number of mouths to feed. It’s all the same.”

The former was criminal, the latter was legal. Even a kidnapper couldn’t be punished if the person they bought didn’t know that distinction.

Right now, the reason to her using this sort of make-up in the Inner Palace was the same as her hiding her ability to write. Although it now no longer mattered, her sudden no make-up face was only just a matter of not knowing the timing.

“Ahh. I’m sorry.”

(He’s unusually meek.)

As he was looking up, he stuck quickly something on her head.

“That hurts.”

“Does it. Have this.”

He wasn’t smiling his usual saccharine smile. His face was also mixed with embarrassment and gloominess.

When she felt her head, she felt something cold and metallic in her hair even though she wasn’t wearing anything.

“Well then, I’ll see you at the assembly place.”

Jinshi turned his back and left the gazebo just like that.

Stuck in her hair was a man’s silver *kanzashi*.

“Ahh, how nice.”

Maomao thought to give it to Infa who looked like she really wanted it, but the other two had the same expressions so she had no choice but to draw in her hands.
Honnyan made a wry smile.

“Aw, he broke the promise so quickly.”

Consort Gyokuyou looked peevish.
She took the *kanzashi* from Maomao’s hand and neatly fastened it in her tied-up hair.

“It looks like you’re not just my maid now.”

For good or evil, Maomao was especially estranged from the talk of the upper echelons of the Imperial Court.
She didn’t know about the significance it represented.

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Chapter 19: Garden Party (1)

The Garden Party was a banquet held in the middle court. There was a crimson carpet laid out in the large gazebo. Long tables were lined up in two rows, where the seat of honour was established at the end.

The arrangement was that the emperor will sit on the seat of honour, with the empress dowager and the imperial brother on both his sides. The Noble Consort and the Able Consort will sit on the east side, and the Virtuous Consort and Pure Consort the west side. The current imperial brother from the same mother is currently first in the line of succession with the death of the crown prince. Nevertheless, she could only think they were arranged like this to start a quarrel. It cannot be helped that the Four Consort's hostility will be stirred up this way.

This imperial brother lives an obscure lifestyle in spite of his mother being the empress dowager.
He was to sit on the seat of honour, belying his public appearance, but it was empty. He rarely leaves his room due to his weak constitution and doesn't perform his official duties either.
All sorts of speculation circulate about him. Some say the many years younger brother is pampered by the emperor. Otherwise, he was confined to his room. Or that he wasn't allowed to go outside, as the empress dowager is overly affectionate to him.

Well, it wasn't something that concerned Maomao.

The dishes came out past noon. She was now enjoying acrobatics and dance performances.
Only the head maid Honnyan accompanied Consort Gyokuyou. As far as they were not needed, the other maids waited for instructions behind the curtain.

The princess was being rocked by the Empress Dowager. Her drifting elegance and her unfading beauty did not pale in

comparison to the Four Consorts around her.

(They should prepare more cover(tent).)

Although it was a curtain, it was only good enough to give shade. It did nothing as a windbreaker.

Even Maomao and the others who had hand warmers thought it was cold. It must be unbearable for the other consorts and their maids.

As expected, the other backup maids were trembling, some of them were standing pigeon-toed. She thought that right now would be a good time to go to the toilet, but considering the other consorts' maids' standpoints, they may not be able to go.

Worryingly, the four consorts' maids are wishing for a war by proxy for their masters.

The head maids, who had the position warn them against doing this were by their respective consorts' sides. There was no one to stop them.

At present, the image of the dispute was "Consort Gyokuyou's army vs. Consort Rifa's army", and "Pure Consort's army vs. Virtuous Consort's army".
By the way, the whole army of Consort Gyokuyou's military camp had four people; not even half of the maids on the other side. Though it was somewhat unfavourable, Infa tried her best.

"Hah, plain, you say? Are you stupid? What you call a maid is someone who serves a master, right? What's the point of pointlessly dressing up?"

It seems they were having a dispute over clothing. The clothing of the maids on the other side, as they served Consort Rifa, were blue themed, with a shawl and lots of decoration. A whole lot gaudier compared to their own.

"What are you saying? Your master will have hardship if you look bad. I knew it. They can only employ that plain woman."

(Hey, looks like I'm being made a fool before everyone's eyes.)

Maomao thought about other people's affairs. Needless to say, the plain woman was none other than herself.

The court lady who had puffed out her chest with pride was one of the people Maomao opposed before. Though she had a strong personality, she lacked the guts to go with it, and for every little thing, she would say, "Do as my father said." She was much too loud and exchanged verbal insults. When Maomao told her, "Then, don't tell people what to do and use your body to do it", she became frightened and wouldn't approach her.

(Did she not get the prostitute style joke?)

At the very least it was something not aimed towards an ignorant young lady.

"If there are things you don't want to see, you put them away, right? It's shameful to bring along such an ugly woman. And you even gave her a single jewel accessory."

It seemed that she noticed Maomao's circumstances completely.

(What a mean thing to say. Even though we were together for two months.)

When she saw the other two maids hold back Infa who was on the verge of leaping into violence, she thought it would be about time to make them quiet down.

Maomao, who was standing in the close behind Infa and the others, looked towards the blue-clad maids who had their hands over their noses.

A maid, who had narrowed her eyes dubiously having noticed something, whispered into the ears of the maid next to her. Just like a game of Chinese Whispers, when the message finally

passed to the last maid, the maids, intimidated, raised shaking fingers, their mouths opened in overwhelmed fluster.

(Did they finally notice me?)

Maomao made her characteristic smile that looked like a wolf that caught its prey to the maids.

“A, aa, aaaahh.”

“Wha-what is it?”

Infa, who didn’t know that Maomao was grinning behind her, doubted her opponents who suddenly trembled like small animals.

“Ah, aaah. W-we’ll let you win this time. B-be thankful.”

Saying that, she spat out a parting remark that didn’t make any sense and moved off to the edge of the curtain. Even though there were other free spaces, they chose to move to the place furthest from Maomao’s group.

Seeing the dumbfounded Infa and the other maids,

(They really were hurt….)

Maomao thought.

Infa recovered and met Maomao’s gaze,

“Gosh, those jerks from before. Sorry about that. For making you feel unpleasant. Even though you are really this cute.”

The apologetic Infa said.

“Don’t worry about it. Leaving that aside, would you like to replace your hand warmer?”

“No, it’s still warm, it’s fine. At any rate, why did they suddenly

start trembling like that?”

“Who knows. Maybe they wanted to go flower picking?”

Maomao said shamelessly.

By the way, the current Maomao had the setup of a young girl who, in addition to been made a disposable piece of a food taster after being sold from being chastised by her parent, bore with two months of grand bullying at the Crystal Palace, and fell to distrusting cruel men to the point of defiling her own face.

It was troubling that Infa and the other’s delusional strength was impressive for their age.

She was also troubled by the image of Jinshi, who had bumped into Maomao, a personage like a celestial maiden being concerned of a pitiful girl.

No matter who you look at it, it was a marvel.

On the other side, another war by proxy was continuing.

The numbers were seven vs. seven.
Maids dressed white outfits and maid dressed in dark coloured outfits.
The former were the Virtuous Consort’s maids, and the latter were the Pure Consort’s.

“That side also has a bad relationship.”

Infa said seriously.

“Their ages are fourteen, and thirty-five. Even though there are both consorts, their ages are far apart enough to be mother and child, and they clash too.”

“The novice is the Virtuous Consort, and the one with the long service is the Pure Consort. That is, well, there is a lot to say.”

Guien, the quiet maid, said.

“That’s true. And they used to be daughter in law and mother in law.”

Airan, the tall maid, also nodded.

“Daughter in law and Mother in law?”

She heard about something that didn’t seem like something from the inner palace. Maomao tilted her head.

“Indeed, it’s a little complex.”

The two had the relationship of the previous emperor’s consort and the crown prince’s consort.

The time the previous emperor passed away, his consorts became nuns to observe mourning.
However, to oppose that, one made the distinction of having not served the previous emperor, saying that she was thrown away once from her earthly life, and now married the son.

(The previous emperor’s era was five years ago.)

That time, whether it was some long talk due to politics or whatever, the Virtuous Consort was nine years old. It was said she became a consort at that age.

(No matter what kind of lusts there are, that isn’t something you hear.)

As she recalled the emperor with the beautiful beard, the comment she heard made her know the shocking truth.

“It’s impossible, isn’t it? That the mother in law was nine-years-old.”

Airan told her something that was hard to believe.

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Chapter 20: Garden Party (2)

Her first impression of Riishu, the Virtuous Consort, was a child who couldn't read the atmosphere.

Maomao and Guien went to where the princess was during the intermission at the end of the first part of the banquet. When Guien went to replaced her cooled hand warmer, Maomao went to check on the baby's condition.

(It doesn't look like anything physically wrong in particular.)

The shrieking Princess Rinrii with her face like an apple, was much more expressive compared to the first time she met her. She must be even doted by her father the emperor and her grandmother the empress dowager.

(But, are they really going to leave her outside like this?)

If the princess caught a cold from this, it wouldn't be unreasonable that Maomao's head might fly.
Because of that, she fashioned a baby bed that was like a bird's nest in the basket, specifically using the lid that was crafted by a craftsman.

(Well, it's cute so it should be fine.)

For Maomao, who didn't like children, to think that she was cute, babies are terrifying beings.

She gently lifted the princess, who started to crawl, wanting to go outside, back into basket to pass her over to Honnyan, when she heard someone breathing nasally behind her.

She saw a young girl right there, who was wearing a luxurious and gorgeous deep peach coloured large sleeves. She was followed by several maids behind her.

Though her face was charming, her lips were puckered, looking displeased.

(This is the young mother in law?)

Seeing Honnyan and Guien deeply bowing their heads, she followed suit.

Consort Riishu, looking truly displeased, was leading her maids off to somewhere.

“Was that the Virtuous Consort?”

“Yes, that’s right. Well, you should pretty much know when you see her.”

“I wonder if there are various things she can’t read?”

The what, would be the cues of this place.

When one becomes part of The Four Consorts, they are bestowed their own personal signature.

Consort Gyokuyou was given the signature of deep crimson and jade, Consort Rifa would be ultramarine and crystal, and the Pure Consort, seeing as that was what she was wearing, should probably be black. She resides in the Pomegranate Palace, so her jewel should be garnet.

(If we go with the Five Elements, white should be appropriate though.)

Consort Riishu’s outfit was deep peach; it was like wearing Consort Gyokuyou’s red outfit. With the banquet seating arrangement where Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Riishu sat beside each other, people would see at a glance that the colours clash.

(Which reminds me.)

She had a feeling that the maids’ quarrel she can hear in the distance was about that issue.

“How should I say this, she’s still young, isn’t she.”

Honnyan, sighing deeply, surmised everything with a single remark.

The lukewarm hand warmers were put into the previously prepared brazier.
Maomao also decided to pass some over to the other maids she saw surrounding them at a distance, with permission from Consort Gyokuyou.

It was somewhat strange seeing maids, who were used to silks and jewellery, get greatly delighted over the warmed stones.

It was unfortunate that Maomao was unable to pass any to the maids from the Crystal Palace, seeing as when Maomao approached them, they maintained a fixed distance as if they were repelled by magnets.

“In the end, you’re just soft-hearted?”

Though Infa said that, amazed,

“That might be as you say.”

She frankly told her what she felt.

(Speaking of that.)

As it was the intermission, it couldn’t be helped that a lot of people were walking through the back of the curtains.
It wasn’t just maids. There were military officers and civil officials too.
Everyone was holding onto an accessory in one hand.

If there were those who faced with court ladies one-to-one, then

there were those who surrounded the court ladies in a several-to-one group.

It seemed that Guien and Airan were also talking to an unknown military officer.

“That way, they can invite excellent capable people who were hidden in the flower garden.”

“Okay.”

“They give the accessory that holds a symbol.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, there’s also another meaning to it.”

“I see.”

Infa crossed her arms and pouted at her unusually uninterested reply.

“I said there’s also another meaning to it—“

“Is that so?”

She wasn’t going to hear that meaning.

“In that case, hand over that *kanzashi* please.”

“Okay. But you’ll have to match it out with the other two with rock, paper, scissors please.”

She said that as she turned over the pocket warmers in the brazier.

This talk didn’t concern Maomao who had planned to quickly return to the prostitution quarter after her two years of service was up.

That aside,

(If I'm going to work that hard, it would be better if I apprenticed at the Crystal Palace instead huh)

Saying that, she made a face as though she was looking at a locust that has ceased to breathe,

"Young lady, please have this."

A *kanzashi* was presented to her before her eyes.

Looking up, she saw a fearless looking large man smiling sweetly at her. He didn't have a matching beard yet. Though he had a face that fell under the category of handsome, Maomao, who had strong resistance to unnecessarily sweet smiles, only looked back at him without any strong feelings.

Though the military officer seemed to notice that her reaction was not what he expected, he did not stop offering his presented hand. His stance shook as he stood body bent on his tiptoes.

Maomao noticed that the cause of the man's dilemma seemed to be herself.

"Thanks."

Maomao took it, looking like a pet owner who praised her puppy. She thought that someway or other, he was like a mutt.

"Mm, cya then. Nice meeting you. I go by Rihaku."

(I probably won't see him again though.)

He waved his hand. There were still ten or so *kanzashi* slipped in the large-breed dog's belt.
So the maids won't be embarrassed, he probably planned to distribute those to everyone.

(If that's the case, I did something bad.)

She gazed at the peach coloured coral *kanzashi*,

“Did you receive that?”

Guien and the other came by saying that. Each of them had their spoils of war slipped to their belts.

“It is a participation prize though.”

Maomao replied without feeling.

And then, from behind,

“Aren’t you sad with only that much?”

It was a noble voice she was familiar with.

She turned around, and there stood Consort Rifa with her voluptuous breasts.

(Did she gain a bit of weight.)

Even so, it wasn’t like her previous body. However, there was still a shadow of the consort’s beauty. She was wearing a dark blue skirt, a sky-coloured tunic, and a blue shawl.

(Isn’t she a bit cold?)

As long as she was with Consort Gyokuyou, she was unable to back Consort Rifa.

Even after she left the Crystal Palace, with only Jinshi as the intermediary, she heard nothing about her condition.
Although she understood that even if she went to visit the palace the maids would stand at the front gates and tell her to get lost.

“It’s been a while.”

“A while.”

Consort Rifa, looking up, touched Maomao's hair.
Again, just like the time with Jinshi, she stuck something there.
This time it didn't hurt.

"Well then, pleasure meeting you."

She elegantly walked away, chiding her attendant maids who couldn't completely hide their shock.

The ones amazed were the Jade Palace's maids.

"Ahh, with this, Gyokuyou-sama would be really peeved."

Infa flipped the decoration of the *kanzashi* with an amazed face.

The three red crystal balls on the kanzashi swayed.

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Chapter 21: Garden Party (3)

When noon came around, Maomao alternated with Honnyan to wait behind Consort Gyokuyou.

Hearing Infa's advice, the three *kanzashi* she received were all slipped to her belt for the time being. Since the thing Consort Gyokuyou gave her was a necklace, wearing one *kanzashi* should have been fine. But that would make a difference in merit to the *kanzashi* she didn't wear.

It was quite a spectacle to view the banquet once again from the seats of honour.

Military officers lined the west side, and civil officials lined the east. Sitting at about one-fifth from the middle of the long table, was Gaoshun on a seat on the military officer side. Though she realised that he was more a big-shot that she thought, she was surprised the eunuch was able to line up there without feeling out of place.

The large man from before was also sitting there. He was closer to the lower seats than Gaoshun, but he might be more successful considering his age.

In contrast, Jinshi was nowhere to be seen. Seeing as he sparkled to that degree, he should be someone she would find easily though. As there was no need to find him, she decided to devote herself to her main job.

Alcohol came first thing before the meal. They were poured bit by bit from glass containers into silver cups.
She shook the cup slowly, checking to see if there were cloudiness in places she touched.
It would blacken if there is arsenic poison.

She sniffed the cup while she slowly turned it, and held the

contents in her mouth. Though she knew there was no poison, if a food taster didn't swallow, the food tasting wouldn't be recognised. She moistened her throat with a gulp, then rinsed her mouth with fresh water.

(Oh.)

It turns out that people were observing her.

The other food tasters had yet to drink from their cups. After they confirmed that nothing happened to Maomao, they timidly raised their cups to their lips.

(Well, that's normal.)

Everyone is afraid of death. If there was anyone who tried first, it was safest to watch to make sure before they do it themselves.

(If you have to use poison at the banquet, it would have to be fast acting.)

Among those people, the one who would deliberately ingest poison would be only Maomao. In this world, there isn't such a rare type of person.

(If you must, *fugu*would be good. The guts would nicely dissolve into the soup.)

That numbing feeling on the tip of the tongue was irresistible. To get that feeling, she didn't know how many times she repeatedly pumped her stomach and vomited. As she thought about that, she met the gaze of a maid who was bringing in the appetisers. The corner of her lips raised. She grinned unpleasantly. She was completely charmed by it.

Maomao returned to her usual expressionless face.

The appetiser she received was a dish that occasionally came out as supper, being the emperor's favourite food.
It looks like the meal was cooked from the Inner Palace side. The usual thing.

As the other food tasters were staring at Maomao, she hurriedly picked it up with her chopsticks.

It was a fish and vegetable *namasu*.
Though he was lusty old man, the food taster had to say that his eating habits were unexpectantly aimed towards health.

(The setting is wrong.)

It wasn't the usual ingredients.
It couldn't be that they made a mistake with the recipe of the emperor's favourite food.

If that was the case, this here had to be something made for a different consort.
The Inner Palace's Meal Duty were capable at their job. Even if they used the same menu, they cooked the emperor's and the consort's meals separately.
When Consort Gyokuyou was nursing, they prepared a menu for continuous milk production.

The food tasting ended. Seeing everyone in the middle of eating the relish, she decided it really was just a mistake in setting.
Consort Riishu, the one who couldn't read the atmosphere, was paled faced.

(Is it something she hates?)

With the emperor's favourite food before her, there was no way the consort could leave it.
So she endured and was eating it.

When she looked back, the food taster maid closed her eyes, lips

trembling. Maomao saw and understood the faint arc those lips drew.

(I saw something unpleasant.)

Returning her gaze, Maomao received the next dish.

○●○

It would be good if this was a normal banquet.

Rihaku felt he was unable to fit in with high-class nobles who look down from the palace circles.

How is this fun, he thought, to have a banquet outside in the cold and wind.

No, it would be fine if it was just a banquet. Just like the olden days, enjoying alcohol and meat with mutual companions in a peach garden would be certainly fun.

However, when there were nobles together, there is always poison in hand.
The cuisines – no matter what high-class ingredients, what secret techniques employed – its deliciousness would be halved by the time the food tasting is over.

It wasn't that he was blaming the food tasters. But seeing their frightened, pale faces as they slowly eat from their spoon every single time, that was what kills his appetite.

Today as well, he thought they are taking an awfully long time for the same pointless thing.

However, it was somehow a little different.

Usually, it was a given that all the food tasters would look at each other as they take their turns holding the spoon.

Today, however, there was a recklessly enthusiastic food taster.

The Noble Consort's food taster, a short maid with not even one *kanzashi* seen on her, swirled a silver cup before drinking from it. After she slowly swallowed it, she rinsed her mouth as if it was nothing.

Thinking back, he was sure he had seen her from somewhere and gave her a *kanzashi* not so long ago. She was neat but wasn't much of a looker. The type that to be quite hidden among the beautiful Inner Palace court ladies.
However, she was a girl, who was expressionless in some respects, with piercing eyes that captivated others.

For such an unfriendly girl, she was surprisingly expressive. While thinking she was expressionless, she suddenly grinned for some reason, and when he was thinking about that, her face returned to what was before, and this time she was making a sullen face.
And yet, she was tasting for poison as if it was natural. She was so strange.

He wondered what sort of face she would make next. It was a perfect time waster.

The soup was presented, the girl put her spoon in it. She peered at it, slowly placed on the tip of her tongue.

He thought that the girl's eyes widened for an instant, and she suddenly smiled as though she was melting in intoxication.

Cheeks flushed, eyes on the verge of watering. Her lips drew an arc, and from her slightly parted lips, he saw white teeth and a captivating tongue.

This was why women are terrifying.

Those lips that licked up that drop, was like a ripe fruit smile of a

high-class prostitute.

The cooking must be indescribably delicious.

To make an ordinary girl make such a fascinating act, was it something inside it, or was it the skills of the Imperial court's cooks?

The time he was gulping down saliva, an unbelievable act came from the girl.

She took a hand towel from her bosom, and spat out what she just ate.

"It's, poison."

The maid, who was expressionless again, stated her task matter and disappeared behind the curtain.

The end of the banquet was announced amid the commotion.

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Chapter 22: After the Festival

“You were, well, quite energetic for a food taster.”

She finished rinsing her mouth and was in the middle of zoning out when the leisurely eunuch – who tended to appear at unexpected times – appeared.
He is often found in places considerably far from the banquet.

“Pleasant day to you, Jinshi-sama.”

She was going to reply with her usual expressionless face, but she was languid from the lingering effects of the poison.
It was slightly irritating to reply with a smile.

“Rather, aren’t you the one having a pleasant day?”

He suddenly grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m obviously taking you to the medical office. You’ll become a joke to be so lively after ingesting poison.”

In actual fact, she was energetic.

She wondered what it would be like if she swallowed it without spitting it out.
She was curious about what will happen to her body.
Right now, her body should be numbing.

(I shouldn’t have spat it out.)

She should have at least finished the remaining soup.
She looked at Jinshi inquiringly.

“You are, an idiot.”

“I’d rather you say my aspirations to my work is high.”

Well, normally, she would withdraw such aspiration.

Somehow, Jinshi, who was usually pointlessly sparkly, had a different air about him right now.

Although there’s a new *kanzashi* on his head, the clothes he wore were the same high-class outfit from before.
No, his collar was slightly dishevelled. Was it because of that?
Indeed, so it was that huh. This damned dog.

His saccharine voice was somewhat subdued and his gentle smile wasn’t there either.

(He can adjust his sparkle?)

Or was it that he was exhausted after a love affair?
The reason he wasn’t at the banquet, could be because he brought or was brought by a court lady or a civil official or a military officer or a eunuch?
Let’s stick with that.
What a truly vigorous matter.

(This way is still fine.)

Though he is certainly beautiful, he didn’t look like a young man appropriate of his age like this. No, rather he looked several times younger.
Before he came here, did Gaoshun request him to postpone the suspicious act?
Leaving whether he’ll listen aside.

“Because of how you looked so healthy when you left, there was a guy who questioned if it was really poison and ate it .”

“Who is it, that fool?”

The poison used was *fugu* poison.
The effects of the poison won’t show if she waited a while after eating.

“The cabinet minister has gone numb. There is a large commotion over there.”

No doubt, with this, the future of this country is also in danger.

“Since we are already like in this situation, I suggest you let them use this.”

She rummaged through her bosom and took out a purse. It was a vomit-inducing drug she put in the false bottom of her breasts.

“I made it so it’ll make you vomit to the point of turning your stomach.”

“Hey, that’ll make it a poison then?”

Jinshi said in an amazed tone.

“There’s also a medical official here. There’s no problem to leave it to him.”

Maomao stopped her steps, suddenly remembering.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have something to ask you. Someone I want to bring along with us.”

“Who could that be?”

He frowned, head tilted.

“Can you call for Riishu-sama, the Virtuous Consort?”

Maomao said in a dignified voice.

The summoned Consort Riishu, who smiled happily at Jinshi with

a look of springtime, looked at Maomao with an unamused ‘oh it’s you’ expression. Perhaps she couldn’t calm down, she was rubbing her left hand with her right hand.

A childish woman.

They had planned to go to the medical office, but because of the crowd there due to the stupid big shot, they had no choice but to use an unused office.
Comparing them like this, there was a difference in the building structure to the Inner Palace and the medical office. Consort Riishu made a slightly sulky face at the plain, unrefined large room.

The one who came in after them in succession, was the only person they requested Gaoshun to get.

Maomao drank the lukewarm antidote. She would be fine even if she didn’t drink it. She drank it, so to speak, for caution’s sake, and so the medicine wasn’t compounded by the other person in vain.

Different to the quack doctor, this medical officer seemed superior.
If he knew about *fugu* poison, he should have understood that an antidote was pointless.

Setting down the lukewarm liquid, she bowed once to Consort Riishu.

“Excuse me.”

“!?”

She took hold of the consort’s left hand, and pulled up the long sleeves, revealing a white graceful arm.

“As I suspected.”

Skin that was supposed to be smooth to touch, had broken out in red rashes.

“There are things you can’t eat, right? Among seafood.”

Consort Riishu cast her eyes down.

“What does that mean?”

Jinshi, with his arms crossed, asked her.
Before she noticed, that celestial maiden’s gracefulness was floating about him again.
However, that usual smile wasn’t there.

“Depending on the person, there are those who respectively have things they can’t eat. Aside from seafood, there are also things like egg, wheat and dairy products. Along the same lines, I can’t eat buckwheat.”

Jinshi and Gaoshun showed clearly surprised faces. It was as if they were saying, ‘even though you can eat poison with no issues’.

(Leave me alone.)

There was once a time she made an effort to make herself able to eat it but her bronchial tube constricted, giving her dyspnoea. She got rashes from eating and absorbing it in her stomach to begin with. It was difficult to regulate the quantity, and recovery was also slow. That’s why she gave up on accustoming herself to it.
She thought of challenging it again sooner or later, but she couldn’t try it in the Inner Palace that only had the quack doctor.

“How did you know about that?”

The consort timidly asked.

“Before that, is your stomach okay? It doesn’t look like you have nausea or cramps though.”

At the words, “If you like, I’ll dispense you a laxative,” the consort shook her head vigorously.
Saying that in front of the heavenly person she admired was considerably mean. That was a bit of revenge.

“Well then, please sit down and listen.”

Gaoshun, a diligent man despite appearances, pulled out a chair. And then, Consort Riishu sat.

“It’s because your meals were switched with Gyokuyou-sama’s meals. As Gyokuyou-sama has no preferences, she usually partakes the same dishes as the emperor.”

And despite this, there were one or two ingredients that were different.

“Is it mackerel and abalone? What you can’t eat?”

The consort nodded.
Maomao didn’t miss the agitation of the maid at the back.

“This is something only people, who have things they can’t eat, know. It is an issue before likes and dislikes. This time, you only got hives, but sometimes it can cause dyspnoea and even heart failure. So to speak, in a way you can understand, it is the same as serving poison.”

The talk of poison elicited a nervous response.

“Riishu-sama, it may have been something you couldn’t speak out with the atmosphere of the place, but that act was extremely dangerous.”

Maomao established that among the consort and the maid with a dazed glance.

“Please never ever forget that.”

She advised that to both parties equally.

Some time passed,

“Please relay that to the ones in charge of setting your meals as well.”

She said that, but it didn’t seem to enter the heads of the consort and the maid.

To the accompanying maid, Maomao explained to her the dangers in detail, and passed over the methods she wrote down to deal with the case of it happening.
The maid was pale-faced, head shaking bit by bit.

(This is what a threat is like, huh)

The maid was the food taster woman.
That woman who smiled.

After Consort Riishuu withdrew from the room, she noticed the clingy atmosphere behind her and the hand that came to touch her shoulder.

She looked at him coldly as if looking at a dried-up earthworm was more preferable.

“Because I am someone of humble birth, can you please not touch me with your hands?”

‘Stop the clinginess’, she told this rascal in a roundabout way.

“Only you would say such things.”

“Well then, everyone is paying attention.”

She briskly pulled away.
With a heartrending sigh, she sought for the refreshing Gaoshun, but the attendant who was loyal to his master appealed to her with his eyes to “Please, bear with it for me.”

“Well then, I’ll go report this to Gyokuyou-sama.”

“Why did you specially have the food taster maid come in the same room?”

He just suddenly gets to the core of things, that’s why it was hard for her to escape.

“What are you talking about? I am unable to understand though.”

She replied expressionlessly.

“Then, was it a mistake in the table setting?”

“I don’t know that either.”

She played ignorance to the end.

“Answer this for me at least. The one they were aiming for was the Virtuous Consort, isn’t it.”

“If there was no poison in the other plates.”

That would be the case.

Seeing Jinshi deep in thought, Maomao withdrew from the room and sighed deeply as she leaned against the wall.

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Chapter 23: Fingers

Maomao was stuck with being carefully nursed the moment she returned to the Jade Palace.

She was forced, dumbfoundedly, into a change of clothes, and was thrown into a vacant bedroom with a high-class futon laid out, not the narrow room she usually used.
The futon was made from high-class cotton, a world of difference to the usual bed that was just piled with straw matting.

“My body doesn’t feel strange, and I already drank the antidote.”

Truthfully speaking, the antidote was meaningless. It was that sort of poison.

“What are you saying? The cabinet minister who ate it was super terrible afterwards. There’s no way that he was fine just because he vomited.”

Infa worriedly placed the damp cloth on her forehead.

(What a truly foolish Cabinet Minister.)

He should have vomited out properly as an initial treatment.
Even if she was curious, she couldn’t leave here now, so she decided to close her eyes as there was nothing else she could do.

It was a pointlessly long day.

She woke up before noon, having accumulated quite a bit of tiredness.
For a maid, this was bad.
After she woke up and changed, she decided to look for Honnyan.

(Before that.)

She returned to her own room to look for the face powder she

always used. Though it's a face powder, it wasn't the pure white thing that everyone used. Rather, it was what she always used to make her freckles.

She applied the powder in front of the polished copper mirror, patting the areas around the tattoo with her fingertips. She particularly coated the top of her nostrils densely.

(I should be going bare-faced at this point.)

It was troublesome having to explain it over and over again. On the contrary, she wondered if she should just hide the freckles, but that, in its own way, was embarrassing. It probably left an impression of a girl falling in love for the first time that she became prettier, somehow that misunderstanding would be mortifying for her.

She ate one mooncake from the remaining snacks as she was hungry.

Honnyan was looking after the princess at Consort Gyokuyou's place.
She couldn't take her eyes off the energetic princess and had her hands full of it, like having to remove the bed-sheet so that it won't be pulled off, or holding the chair used for walking practice for the princess.

"I sincerely apologise about oversleeping."

She bowed deeply.

"It would have been fine if you took a rest today."

Consort Gyokuyou smacked her cheeks with a troubled expression and tilted her head.

"That cannot do. Please instruct me if there is anything."

She said something like that, but in actual fact, seeing how she normally went about doing her own things, so it would be fine whether there was anything or not.

“Freckles…”

Consort Gyokuyou brought up a topic she really didn’t want her to mention.

“I’m not comfortable with it, so can we leave it like this?”

“You have a point.”

She backed down surprisingly easily.
Maomao faced the consort with a dubious face.

“Everyone came close asking who in the world that maid was. It was dreadful.”

“I sincerely apologise.”

“That face is convenient because it’s not recognisable at a glance.”

She had planned to go about peacefully, but it didn’t seem to be the case.
Exactly what went wrong?

“Also, Gaoshun has been here since this morning. He seemed so free he didn’t know what to do, so he’s outside weeding for me.”

(Weeding….)

As expected of the diligent man, though she was pretty sure that he was a significantly high official. Surely, there was no doubt that he powerfully seizing the hearts of the other maids.

“May I use the living room?”

“Go ahead. We’ll get him at once.”

Consort Gyokuyou took the princess from Honnyan.

Honnyan left the room to call Gaoshun.

It would have been faster if she went herself, but Consort Gyokuyou stayed her hand. And so she moved to the living room.

“This is from Jinshi-sama.”

Gaoshun hurriedly greeted her as soon as he arrived and placed the cloth bundle on the table.

She opened the silver food vessel. The soup that was served was inside.
Originally, it wasn’t for Maomao. It was supposed to be Consort Gyokuyou’s food.
She refused yesterday, but in the end, they politely bought it over for her. Because they’re persistent about it, in other meaning she was ordered to investigate the case.

“Please don’t eat it.”

“I won’t eat it.”

(Silver tarnishes severely, after all)

Gaoshun probably didn’t know the other reason why she wasn’t eating it.
He looked at her doubtfully.

Maomao held the vessel, taking care to not touch it directly, and squinted at it.
Not the contents of the vessel, but the vessel itself.

“Did you hold this with your bare hands?”

“No. I only mixed the potentially poisoned contents with a spoon.”

He was against touching poisonous things. To not touch it, he

wrapped it up with a cloth.

Hearing that, Maomao's lips curved.

"I see. Please wait a second."

Maomao left the living room and went to the kitchen.
With a rustle, she took out something.

Next, she went to the bedroom she slept in just then.
She bowed her head at the high-class mattress, and unravelled the seams of the cloth, returning to the living room with its contents.

What she bought in were white powder and soft-looking cotton.

Maomao rolled the cotton into a ball and added the powder.
She patted the silver container down with it.

Gaoshun tilted his head, peering close.

"Well."

Traces of powder remained on the vessel.

"These are touch marks of human hands."

Fingers break out in oil easily and so leave marks on metals on contact.
It was much more so for severely tarnishable silver utensils.

There was a time, in the past, where her dad stained the vessels that Maomao wasn't allowed to touch as a prevention against her pranks.
Using that as a reference, it went surprisingly well when she tried out on a whim. The finer the powder, the more clearly you can see the marks.

"You must wipe it with a cloth before you use silver utensils. It's

pointless if there's tarnish on it."

There were several fingerprints on the vessel.
She could make many guesses on how it was held based on just the finger sizes and location.

(As I thought, even the markings can be read out.)

"The one who held the vessel…"

She realised she made the mistake of starting to speak.
That didn't escape Gaoshun.

"Did something happen?"

"No."

There is no meaning to keep a secret badly.
It couldn't be helped that yesterday's trick became pointless.

"It should be four people in total, who touched this vessel."

She pointed at the white prints, not touching it with her finger.

"As your fingers don't touch the vessel when you polish it, it would be the one who served the soup, the one who set the table, and the Virtuous Consort's food taster plus one other person."

Gaoshun raised his fearless face to look at Maomao.

"Why did the food taster do that?"

If possible, she wanted to go through with it peacefully.
That was dependent on the looks of this reticent man.

"It's simple."

Maomao set down the container.
A bitter expression ran across her face.

“Bullying.”

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Chapter 24: Kirin

“Bullying….”

Gaoshun had a look of disbelief.
That’s right. Maids must not do things like that to high-ranked consorts. It was unthinkable.

“It is hard to believe.”

If the other side was reluctant to understand, Maomao also didn’t want to talk about it.
She didn’t like to talk of speculation.

However, it was crucial to explain why the maid touched the container.
She decided to honestly state her opinion instead of doing a poor job of faking it.

“Can you tell me about it?”

“I will. I want to say in advance that this is just speculation.”

“That’s fine.”

To start off, she expressed it from the unique perspective of Consort Riishu.
Her becoming the previous emperor’s consort despite her young age, and consequently leaving her family.

Many women were educated to fully commit their body as wives to their husband. It was more prominent for those who were well-bred.

Even if it was said to be political, Consort Riishu marrying the son of the deceased husband was severely unvirtuous.

“Did you see Consort Riishu’s Garden Party outfit?”

"…."

"She didn't read the atmosphere." [T/N: She was oblivious to it all.]

However, everyone in her retinue was wearing correspondingly white outfits.

"Normally, the maids are supposed to advise the consort what to wear. Otherwise, they wear outfits that match with hers' accordingly. But what we saw there, was as if only Consort Riishu was unable to see that she was being played the fool."

Maids are people who raise up their master. That was what Honnyan and the other maids told her. At the Garden Party, even the things Infa said, she understood as reality.

If she thought of it that way, a different angle to the incident about those maids arguing amongst each other on Consort Riishu's outfit comes out.

(The Pure Consort's maids told off the cowardly Consort Riishu's maids.)

The young Consort Riishu most surely wore that outfit to match her incited maids.
There was no doubt about it.
In the Inner Palace, as everyone around her were enemies, the only ones she could trust were her maids.

"It's not just that. Didn't they swap the meals to trouble Consort Riishu?"

Gaoshun asked to make sure.

"That's right. As a result, she narrowly escaped death."

Fugu poison has no effect as it stands for a short while.

In other words, if it wasn't swapped, she would have put it in her mouth thinking that the food tasting was fine. It would have taken ten minutes.

"What a distasteful way of doing things."

(Let's leave the speculation off here.)

She picked up the vessel again and pointed with her finger.

"This here is probably the fingerprints of the one who infused the poison. They held it by the edge when they mixed in the poison."

You must not touch the edge of food vessels. That was also Honnyan's teachings. The reason being that you must not contaminate the place where the lips of the noble ones touch with your fingers.

"This ends my opinion."

Gaoshun looked at the silver food vessel, stroking his chin.

"Can I ask one question?"

"What is it?"

She replied Gaoshun, bundling the food vessel.

"Why did you cover for that maid?"

In contrast to Maomao who was looking dubiously, Gaoshun is asking out of curiosity, so she added.*

"Compared to a consort, a maid's life is worth close to nothing."

Even more so for a food taster.

Gaoshun gave a barely perceptible nod as if he understood her meaning.

"I will explain everything to Jinshi-sama."

"Thank you very much."

After she sent off Gaoshun who left, Maomao sat down on the chair with a thump.

“That’s right. I need to thank her.”

(She took the time to swap it for me after all.)

As the same time she thought, ‘I knew I should have swallowed it’.

○●○

“That is all.”

Jinshi ran his hand up his hair as he listened to Gaoshun’s report. The desk was piled with documents waiting to be stamped.

“No matter when I hear it, you have a way with words.”

“Is that so?”

The fearless attendant said curtly.

“No matter how I think of it, the perpetrator is an insider.”

“It’s turning out to be the case from the circumstances.”

His head was starting to hurt.
He wanted to stop thinking.
At any rate, there was no time to sleep from tomorrow.
He couldn’t even change clothes.
He wanted to stamp his feet.

“Your true nature is coming out.”

He wasn’t smiling as usual. He was sulking, looking like his age. It seems that Gaoshun understood him clearly.

“Isn’t it fine? There’s no one here.”

“I am here.”

“You are an extra.”

“No.”

He asked it in jest, but it didn’t pass through to this overly serious man.
This person was bothersome, being also the one looked after him since his birth.

“I’m still wearing the *kanzashi*.”

“Aah, that’s no good.”

“Because it’s hidden, no one will notice it.”

When he pulled out the deeply embedded kanzashi, the design became visible.
It was called a *kirin*, an indescribable legendary creature that was both deer and horse.

“Then I’ll leave it to you, for safekeeping.”

He casually flung that towards Gaoshun. [T/N: who was who wasn’t specified, but I’m guessing it goes like this.]

“Please treasure it. It’s an important thing.”

“I get it already.”

“You don’t get it.”

After he finished scolding, his minder for sixteen years left the office.

Jinshi, with a childish expression, laid his head on the table.

There was still a lot of work left.
He must quickly make free time.

“Let’s do this.”

He did a large stretch and picked up the writing brush.
So that he could become a leisurely person, he had no choice but to finish his work.

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Chapter 25: Rihaku

That poisoning assassination commotion turned out to be rather serious.
Shaoran came flaring about it to ask Maomao.

The back of the laundry shed was the maidservants' gossip spot. They were sitting on the wooden boxes there, eating hawthorn that was lined up like dango.

(There's probably no way that she thinks I am related to the incident.)

The image of Shaoran stuffing her cheeks with hawthorn while swinging her legs made her look like she was younger than she was.

"It's a maid from Maomao's place, right. The one who eats poison."

"I guess so."

She didn't lie.

"I only just heard about what kind of person, but I don't know anything. Are they okay?"

"I guess so."

She skirted the topic again, somehow feeling very uncomfortable about it. Shaoran, at a loss for what to do, pouted.

Shaoran swung her skewer that had one piece of hawthorn left. It looked like a blood-red coral ball *kanzashi*.

"Well, then. Did you get any *kanzashi* and stuff?"

"I guess."

Four in all, imbued with gratitude. She also included Consort Gyokuyou's necklace.

"How nice. Then, I guess you'll be leaving here."

(Mm?)

"What did you just say?"

"Huh? Aren't you going to leave?"

Infa had been insistently saying it.
It was her own self who brushed it off.

She was troubled at her failure.
She shook her head, falling into self-hatred.

"What's wrong?"

She looked at Shaoran who gazed at her dubiously.

"Tell me everything about that."

Shaoran puffed out her chest at the sight of an unusually motivated Maomao.

"'Kay, will do."

The talkative girl taught her how to use the *kanzashi*.

○●○

Rihaku was summoned after training.
While sweating, he handed his edgeless sword to his subordinate.

A delicate eunuch handed over a bamboo slip and a woman's *kanzashi*.
It was the only one among the several he handed out before, the *kanzashi* decorated with peach-coloured coral.

He didn't think anyone would take it seriously, knowing the courtesy, but it turns out it wasn't the case.
It would be bad to embarrass her, but to actually go through with it was also troubling.
However, it would be a loss if she was a beauty.

He looked at the wooden slip as he thought of ways to gently refuse.

'*Jade Palace Maomao*'

That was written there.

He handed it out to only one of the court ladies of the Jade Palace.
It could only be that expressionless maid.

Mystified, Rihaku stroked his chin as he prepared for a change of clothes.

The Inner Palace was forbidden to actual men.
Rihaku, who really didn't want to be cut down, was in the obviously forbidden garden. He probably wouldn't be here after this, it would be troubling if there was.

Though it was such a terrifying place, if he had special permission, he could summon a court lady from within.
This *kanzashi* was one of the ways of doing that. One of the many.

Borrowing the office of the central gate, he waited for the person he summoned.
The room, which wasn't really wide, had two persons' number of tables and chairs. The doors on both sides each had a eunuch standing there.

A skinny, short maid appeared from the door of the Inner Palace side.
Freckles and spots covered the area around her nose.

"Who the hell are you?"

“I get that often.”

The maid, who said that with blunt indifference, covered her nose with her palm. A face he’s seen before appeared.

“Don’t tell me you’re disguised with make-up?”

“I get that often.”

He took in the truth without a look of displeasure.
He got the gist of it.
That she was that food taster maid.

However, he just couldn’t link that fascinating smile of a prostitute when he looked at the face that was covered in spots.
It was a matter of fact that she was a mysterious person.

“However, to still call me out like this, do you know the meaning of it?”

He crossed his arms. Crossed his legs too.

As the military officer with the large build was in the middle of sitting down arrogantly, the short girl confidently spoke out.

“I was thinking of returning home.”

She said it without any strong feeling.
Rihaku scratched his head.

“And, you want me to help?”

“That’s right. If you can guarantee my identity, I heard it is possible for me to return home for a short time.”

She spoke out something unexpected.
He wanted to ask her, “Do you know the original meaning?”

No matter, this girl who was called Maomao, seems to be using him to go home. It wasn’t to catch the military officer.

Maybe she was bold, maybe she was reckless.

Rihaku snorted, hands on his chin.
It could be said that his behaviour was bad, he didn't feel like correcting it.

"The hell? Are you saying that I going to be thoroughly used by a lass?"

Rihaku is a good fellow, but he makes a scary face when he scowls.
The type of face that, when he rebukes a slackening subordinate, would reduce them to the point of even apologising for something they were unrelated to.

And yet, her brows barely twitched.
She only gazed at him expressionlessly.

"No, I only want to give thanks to these people."

Maomao placed a tied-up bundle of wooden slips on the table.
They looked like letters of introduction.

"Meimei. Pairin. Joga."

Women names that Rihaku had heard of before. No, a lot of other men besides Rihaku should know these names.

"You mean to see the flowers of *Rokushoukan*?"

That was the name of the high-class brothel that exhausts one year's worth of silver in a single night. The names just then, were the favourites called the Three Princesses.

"If you're worried, you'll understand if you see this."

The girl smiled at him, only curving her lips.

“You’re joking.”

“As you can verify.”

It was something completely unbelievable.
At best, it was difficult to think of that a maid of such calibre has a connection with the brothel that even high-class bureaucrats won’t touch.
What is this supposed to mean?

When he scratched his head again from the incomprehensibility of it, the girl suddenly sighed and stood up.

“What are you doing?”

“It doesn’t look like you believe me. We’re wasting time.”

She smoothly took out something from her bosom.
Two *kanzashi*. They were made of red crystal, and silver.

“I sincerely apologise for wasting your time. I have others.”

“W-wai–“

He grabbed the wooden slips as to try take them away.
Maomao, expressionless, looked at Rihaku.

“What is it?”

He thought he lost.

○●○

“Isn’t that great? Gyokuyou-sama.”

Honnyan was looking at Maomao from the gap of the door. Her demeanour was better than usual. She was packing with cheer.
It was strange as the person herself wasn’t usually like this.

“Well, it’s only three days.”

“I guess so.”

The head maid held up the princess who used her as standing support.

“She absolutely doesn’t understand.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

The other maids were telling “Congratulations” to Maomao, but the person herself didn’t seem to understand. She replied with a carefree, “I’ll go buy souvenirs”.

Consort Gyokuyou was standing by the window, gazing out.

“Good grief. That child is the pitiable one.”

She sighed deeply, but a mischievous smile rose.

It was the day after Maomao’s departure when Jinshi, who finally became a leisurely person after finishing his work, visited the Jade Palace.

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Chapter 26: Returning Home

I want to go back, I want to go back, the prostitution quarter she repeatedly mentioned wasn't *that* far away.
The size was one of the Inner Palace, no different to one town, but the Royal Capital completely surrounded it.
The prostitution quarter was opposite to the Imperial Court. If you cross over the high wall and deep moat, it was within walking distance.

(Even though it's a luxury to go by horse carriage)

Rihaku, the big man sitting beside her, was humming as he held the horse's reins.
He had understood her words as true and passed over the wooden slips.
So he could meet the prostitutes he yearned for. Was it that sort of thing?

Those you call prostitutes should not be all counted as the same.
If there were those who sold their bodies, there were those who sold their art.
Only those called favourites get a lot of customers. Their value increases because of that.

Just drinking a cup of tea with them will cost silvers. The price is even more unreasonable for sleeping and the like.
This type of revered existences become a type of idol and are admired by the townspeople.
There are even those among the town girls who admire that and knock on the gates of the red-light district. Even though those that become that are few in between.

The *Rokushoukan* is well-established even within the royal capital's prostitution quarter. It holds a selection of middle to the highest-class prostitutes.
The ones who Maomao call Older Sisters were among the highest-

class.

She could see the nostalgic scenery from the noisily rocking horse carriage.
The fragrant aroma from the shop of the *kushiyaki*she wanted to eat spread across the street. Willow trees swaying along the waterway. The rising voices of firewood vendors.

When they passed through the magnificent gate, a world covered in rich colours spread out.
It was still daytime. There were few people walking about, but prostitutes with free time waved their hands over the handrails on the second floor.

The horse carriage stopped in front of a *roukaku*with a conspicuous large gate.

Maomao rushed over to the old woman standing by the entrance the moment she lightly descended from the horse carriage.

“It’s been a while, granny.”

She said that to the skinny woman who was biting on a pipe. A long time ago, she had been a prostitute said to have tears of pearl. Nowadays, she became wizened like a dead tree; her tears had dried up completely. She also refused her redeeming, and continued to work even after her term of service ended. Now, she became a madam who everyone was afraid of. Time was cruel.

“What is this? It has been a while. You foolish girl.”

A shock ran through the pit of her stomach.
It was mysterious that she thought that even the taste of her mouth souring from the regurgitation of gastric juices was nostalgic.
How many times in the past did she vomit back out excessive poison like this?

Rihaku, who was a good person at heart, stroked Maomao’s back while not understanding what was going on.
His face said, “The hell is this hag?”

She covered the polluted ground with dirt using her toes.

Rihaku, who was next to her, looked at Maomao in concern.

“Hmm, is this the honoured guest?”

She appraised Rihaku with her eyes.
The horse carriage was entrusted to the shop’s manservant.

“Good physique. Looks are also handsome. Doesn’t he look like the promotion stock that people are talking about?”

“Grandma, what are you trying by saying that in front of the person?”

The madam feigned ignorance and called for a *kamuro*who was sweeping before the gate.

“Call for Pairin. Today, we grind tea.”

“Pairin….”

Rihaku swallowed audibly.

That was the prostitute whose name was known as a talented dancer.

For the sake of Rihaku’s honour, it should be said that this isn’t a simple lust for a simple prostitute, but rather thoughts of longing. It was an honour for him, even if it’s just sitting together for tea, to meet the idol from above the clouds with his own eyes.

(Pairin huh, it might possibly be possible.)

“Rihaku-sama.”

Maomao nudged the large man who was engrossed in his thoughts.

“Do you have confidence in your biceps?”

“I train my body but I’m not too sure?”

“Is that so. Please do it well.”

The large man, his head tilted, left following the little girl.

Maomao was grateful that he brought her along up to this point. Of course, she meant to give back something suitable in return. That dream of one night would become the memory of a lifetime.

“Maomao.”

The owner of the hoarse voice made a terrifying smile.

“You disappeared without contact for ten months.”

“It can’t be helped. I was working at the Inner Palace.”

The general explanation was written on the wooden slip.

“Although I’ll reject at a glance, I’ll look after him just this time.”

“I know already.”

She took out a bag from her bosom.

It was half the wages she earned from the Inner Palace up until now.

“This much, wouldn’t be enough.”

“Of course not, I didn’t think you would call out Pairin-neechan.”

She had brought enough money expecting a night of blissful dream with a high-class prostitute.
Even Rihaku would be satisfied with just a glance of the Three Princesses.

“Wouldn’t that just barely be insufficient for a seat for tea?”

“Fool. With that physical strength, there’s no way Pairin would do nothing.”

(I knew it.)

Though it can be said that the highest-class prostitutes don’t sell their body, it doesn’t mean that they won’t fall in love.

“That would be what they call an act of god….”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll put it properly on your tab.”

“I said I can’t pay for it.”

(Even if I add in the rest it won’t be enough. No matter how I think.)

Maomao was deep in thought.
No matter she looked at it, it was a commitment.

“What are you saying? At worse you can just use your body to pay for it. You’ll just be transferred from the emperor to a brothel – it won’t be any different. There are dilettantes who are fond of even defective goods like you.”

For these couple of years, the hag has been excessively recommending Maomao to become a prostitute. She, who had devoted her entire life to the prostitution quarter, had never thought that prostitution was a career of misfortune.

“I still have one year left to my term of service though.”

“In that case, steadily send forth the honoured guests. Not old geezers, but those we can moderately exploit for a long time like the one just then.”

(Umm. As I thought, he's being exploited.)

The greedy hag only thinks about money.
The idea of selling her body was already passed, so she must moderately send in sacrifices hereafter.

(Could even a eunuch be a customer?)

Though Jinshi's face rose to her head, that was no good.
The prostitutes would become serious and might break the store, so that idea was rejected.

Nonetheless, it feels bad if it were Gaoshun or the quack doctor.
It would be hard to get the madam to exploit them.

It was truly inconvenient to not have a rendezvous point.

"Maomao, the geezer should be home right now, so hurry up and go."

"Ahh, I will."

Even if she thought deeply, she had no solution at present.

Maomao escaped through the side road of the *Rokushoukan*.

The prostitution quarter suddenly became desolate the moment she came out from one street.
Rows of shacks, beggars collecting coins with chipped bowls, there were also streetwalkers with syphilis scars.

One of the dilapidated shacks was Maomao's home.

In the narrow house which only had two rooms of dirt floor, there was a person hunched over using the mortar.
Carved with deep wrinkles, soft features, a man who like an old woman.

“I’m back. Dad.”

“Hey, you’re late.”

He greeted her normally and stumbled off to prepare tea as if nothing happened.
She accepted the tea that was prepared in a worn teacup.
She told him bit by bit of everything that happened until now, and her dad only replied with sounds of listening.

After she had porridge, which had an enormously increased portion of medicinal herbs and tubers, as dinner, she decided to sleep. She will take a bath from the hot water she received from the *Rokushoukan* tomorrow.

She curled up in a simple bed that was just a straw mat laid out on the dirt floor.
Her dad piled clothes on her from above, and ground the mortar tirelessly like a stove fire.

“The Inner Palace huh. It must be fate.”

The words her father muttered faded away amid her sleepiness.

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Chapter 27: Misunderstanding

The three days of her homecoming passed by in a blink of an eye.

Meeting the people she missed, her feeling of wanting to always remain like this was strong, but there was no way for her resign from her job in the Inner Palace, so she had no choice but to again trouble Rihaku, her identity guarantor, to return.

Above all, her back was being pressured by the madam who was wondering what kind of sadist Maomao's first sell will come out as.

(It looks like he saw a good dream.)

Seeing Pairin-neechan, who was glowing excessively, and Rihaku, whose eyes were sagged in the corners, who had changed like honeyed apricot, she regretted that she overpaid her reward to him. As a result, the next person to sell their body was determined.

Well, she somewhat sympathised with Rihaku, who, having known of heavenly nectar once, will come to find the ones on earth unpalatable.

The madam will surely make a killing of him.
Beyond that was not Maomao's responsibility.

And so, she was going to return to the Jade Palace with the souvenirs, but there was a celestial maiden-like young man who was cloaked in an excessively dangerous air right there.

She felt an ominous poisonous air from the direction of the gentle smile.

Why is that, he is excessively glaring at her?

No matter what his character is, a beauty was a beauty. Besides, when he glared, there was an intensity to it.

As it was bothersome, she only bowed her head as much as she needed, and headed for her own room, when he firmly grabbed her shoulders with the force of his nails digging in.

“They are waiting in the parlour.”

A honey-like voice flowed into her ears. Honey was honey, but it was wolfsbane honey.

Gaoshun, who was at the back, his eyes told her to give up.
Consort Gyokuyou, who seemed to be troubled, her eyes shining.
Honnyan, who was, for some reason, looking at Maomao with blaming eyes.

The three maids too, were more curious than worried.
She would be probably thoroughly questioned after this.

(Just what is happening?)

She put down her belongings, changed into her maid clothes and went to the parlour.

“What do you require of me?”

There was only Jinshi in the room. He was elegantly dressed in simple official attire, legs crossed on the chair, elbows on the table. Somehow, she felt his attitude was worse than usual. Was it her imagination? She wanted it to be her imagination. Let’s take it as imagination.

There is no Gaoshun, the breath of fresh air.
Consort Gyokuyou was nowhere to be found.

Well, in other words, they couldn’t bear to stay.

“It seems you returned home.”

“Yes.”

“How was it?”

“Everyone was good.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes.”

“….”

“….”

“What kind of man was this Rihaku guy?”

“Yes. He’s my identity guarantor.”

(Why the name?)

He will be a regular customer from now on. An important source of income.

“Do you not understand what I mean? That meaning.”

“Yes. He must be a high official to be my guarantor who can properly maintain my identity.”

Jinshi, for some reason, looked extremely tired.
Was it because she said the obvious?

“Did you receive a *kanzashi*?”

“He distributed many of them. I received one out of obligation.”

Now that she thought about it, he was generous. Though it was a simple design, it was a finely made *kanzashi*.

“So you mean, even though you received one out of obligation, *I* lost?”

(*I*?)

She tilted her head at the (first-person) pronoun she wasn't used to hearing.

"Even though *I* gave you one too, you didn't come to me at all."

He looked sulky.
Without his celestial smile, he looked about the same age as Maomao. Rather, he looked even younger.
She admired that he was a person who can change her view of him up to now with a single expression.

It turns out that Jinshi was unable to stomach the fact that she relied on Rihaku and didn't come to talk to him. How mysterious. Even though it's a given that people would be happy to be not be concerned with troublesome things. Was it because that guy was a leisurely person?

"I sincerely apologise. It did not occur to me that I was to give a satisfactory compensation to Jinshi-sama."

(Would inviting a eunuch to a brothel be rude?)

It may be possible to go to a place only to tea drinking and poetry recitals, and then go on to indulge in sensual affairs. It was awkward to invite people who were no longer men to a place like that.
Above all, people like Jinshi. It would be *a mummy hunter become a mummy*for the prostitutes everywhere.

"What do you mean, compensation? Did you pay this Rihaku guy with that?"

He was making a dubious face for some reason.
It was an uneasy expression, combined with displeasure.

"That's right. I pleasured him with a dream of one night."

(Like this, he probably won't return to reality for a while.)

Even a gallant military personnel would become a kitten when they look at Pairin-neesan.
Would he come carrying gold coins to her from now on?

She looked at Jinshi. All the blood had drained from his face. His hand, holding onto the teacup, was quivering.

(Did the room get colder?)

Maomao added charcoal to the brazier, and stirred the flames with a fan.

“It seems he was greatly satisfied. I think I worked hard.”

(I also need to work hard on finding new customers.)

As she made a fist at her new resolve, there was the sound of the teacup breaking behind her.

“What are you doing?”

Shards of ceramic scattered about.
Jinshi stood up with a pale face. His clothes were soaked through with tea.

“Ahh, I’ll bring you something to wipe up now.”

She opened the door, and right there, was Consort Gyokuyou, clutching her stomach in laughter.
Gaoshun, with an extremely tired face.
Honnyan, who was struck speechless with shock.

Maomao, who had no idea what was going on, went to the kitchen to look for a dishcloth for the time being.

○●○

“How long are you going to be irritable?”

Jinshi rested his face on the table even though he was already back in his office.
Gaoshun sighed deeply.

“Don’t forget you are in the middle of work.”

“I get it already.”

He doesn’t get it.
The person called Jinshi doesn’t reply like a child.
He doesn’t get overly attached to his toys.

He suffered hardship even though he heard the details from Consort Gyokuyou who was convulsing with laughter afterwards. As a collateral for undertaking her identity, the man was granted a meeting with a star(popular prostitute) he longed for. That the girl helped in such a way, was completely not what they imagined.

However, Gaoshun wondered what his master imagined. Ahh, it was scary to be young.

Jinshi was somewhat back to normal, but he was still disgruntled.

Well, quickly finishing his work to go meet her, only to find that she returned home with an unknown man came as a bolt out of the blue.

Gaoshun had no free time to soothe children indefinitely.
He placed a lacquered box on the table and took out a correspondence from the inside.

“The report from a couple of days ago finally arrived.”

To look for a court lady with burn scars. It had been a month since.

“That took way too long.”

Raising his face that was cast down, *Jinshi*'s face returned.

"I sincerely apologise."

To not make excuses.
That was Gaoshun's principle.

"Just who was it?"

"Yes. It was surprisingly a big shot."

The correspondence was spread out on the table.

"Pomegranate Palace, Fonmin. The Pure Consort's head maid."

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Chapter 28: Self or Other

"Uwah, won't the lass come along with me too?"

The quack doctor's shoulders were trembling when he begged her, so she considered it with 'why not'.
He brought her along to the front of the east gate's military station.
There were several eunuchs surrounding something, and maids gathered together around them in a doughnut shape.

"It's good that it's winter."

There was a woman with a pallid face hidden under the woven mat. She had matted hair and bluish black lips.
For a drowned corpse, she looked relatively nice, but she still wasn't something people were comfortable to be looking at. It was truly good that it was cold season.

The quack doctor who should be doing autopsy was hiding behind Maomao's back like a maiden.
He was, as a matter of fact, a quack doctor.

It seemed she was floating in the outside moat this morning.
No matter how you look, with her appearance, she was surely a court lady from inside the Inner Palace.
She couldn't be dealt with properly outside, and so the quack doctor was summoned, but.

"Can the lass look instead of me?"

Though his loach moustache was quivering and he came to look at her using upturned eyes, but it wasn't that he didn't know about that sort of thing.
What could he be thinking about getting people to do?

"I can't. I've been told to not touch corpses."

“That is surprising.”

Saying something rude yet again was the heavenly voice she was used to hearing.
Needless to say, the surrounding court ladies raised their coquettish voices. It was like watching a stage play.

“Pleasant day to you, Jinshi-sama.”

(Though it isn’t anything pleasant before a corpse.)

She looked at the lovely young man without any deep emotion as usual. Gaoshun, of course, was waiting behind him. He was a worldly-wise person who was always appealing to Maomao with his gaze.

“So, teacher. Will you look properly for me?”

“I understand.”

Although his face was slightly reddened, he looked at the drowned corpse reluctantly.
He timidly turned over the mat cover.
Court ladies let out shocked screams from the back.

It was a tall woman. She was wearing stiff wooden shoes, and the one foot that wasn’t wearing it was wrapped in bandages. Her fingertips were deep red, nails were brutally damaged.
It was understood she was from Food Duty from what she wore.

“You look fine from seeing it.”

“It’s scenery I’m used to.”

If you go a little deeper from the clean prostitution quarter, you go into the lawless area.
It wasn’t rare to find the miserable figures of young girls who had been passed around and violated.

In one perspective, you may think that there isn't a reason to enclose prostitutes in a cage, but the flip-side was also to protect them so they don't get dragged into the dangers around them.

"Let's hear your opinion at the back."

"I understand."

(It must have been cold.)

Maomao, after the quack doctor finished his autopsy, politely covered the corpse with the mat.
Though there was no point in doing so at this point.

Jinshi brought her along to the Chief Palace Official's room.
As usual, the Chief Palace Official was on standby outside.

They avoided speaking about the corpse at the Jade Palace.
That sort of thing wasn't appropriate in a place with a baby.

(He might as well get his own room.)

She lowered her head at the elderly Chief.
Apologies for every single time.

"The Palace Guard is under the impression that it was a suicide by drowning."

Saying that she climbed the wall and threw herself off into the moat.
The girl was a Food Duty maidservant, as expected. She had been working until yesterday. With that in consideration, she could have only jumped last night.

"We don't know if it was really suicide, but, at least, I think that it was impossible for her to do this alone."

"What do you mean?"

Jinshi who was sitting elegantly on the chair asked her with a refined voice.
As if he was different person to the strangely flustered young man from the other day.

“There are no stairs on the castle wall.”

“That is true.”

“Can you go up with a grappling hook?”

“That might be impossible.”

It was really hard to for her to talk with him asking like he was testing her out.
She wanted to tell him to stop asking for every single time she spoke, but Gaoshun was watching so she kept silent.

“Though there are ways to go up without using any particular tools, but it should be impossible for that court lady.”

“What did you say? What ways are there?”

It was during Fuyou-hime’s ghost disturbance previously. Maomao had always questioned on how the other woman went up the outer wall. She wasn’t the type of person to scale the wall.

Due to her nature to pursue her curiosity about until she understood, she diligently went around looking at the castle wall. What she found was protrusions at every respective four corners of the outer wall. By stepping on the bricks that were purposely made to protrude from the wall, it was then possible to ascend the wall. It would have been easy for the Fuyou-hime who was talented in dancing.

“It would be difficult for most women, much less for someone with foot binding.”

The woman's feet were wrapped in bandages and made to wear small wooden shoes. Her feet were crushed, bound in cloth and confined in the wooden shoes. It was the practice based on the standard that smaller feet were beautiful.

"Are you saying it's a murder?"

"I don't know. Just that, I think that we need to make sure that she fell into the moat when she was still alive."

There was no doubt that those fingers dyed in red blood scratched the moat wall many times.
She didn't want to think about what it was like inside the icy water.

"Should we investigate more thoroughly?"

She was troubled even with that sweet smile that cannot be refused.
She couldn't do what she can't do.

"My medicine teacher taught me to never touch corpses."

"Why is that? Because you dislike mourning/taboo?"

Doctors come in contact with the sick and wounded. It seems he wanted to say that they will certainly have a lot of contact with dead people.

"Even humans can become ingredients for medicine."

Maomao murmured the reason.

At any rate, if you must do it, let it be your last, her dad had told her.
If you do it once, you'll be like a grave disturber, he said something that was awfully rude.
She wanted to say that she had that much good sense for that, but all in all, she abided by his words.

Well, it was something like that.

Jinshi and Gaoshun both looked taken back, and shook their heads as though to say, “I see.”
Gaoshun looked at her like she was a pitiful thing.

That was completely rude. Maomao held down her shaking fists.

Afterwards, what was heard from rumours was that the dead girl was at the poisoning assassination commotion from the other day. A will was also discovered, and the curtains of the incident closed by saying it was suicide.

In this world, even someone’s speculation could become truth.

T/N: The title of this chapter (自他) should be referring to the manner of the maidservant’s death. It’s a question of whether she killed herself or someone else killed her, so an alternate title could be ‘suicide (自殺) or murder (他殺)’, maybe.

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Chapter 29: Honey (1)

Tea parties are a legitimate job for consorts.
Consort Gyokuyou also performed her job as she did every day.
There were times she performed it at the Jade Palace, other times she was summoned to another consort's place.

(It's a very important way to see what the consorts are doing.)

Maomao wasn't very fond of tea parties.
All they talk about were the latest clothing fads and cosmetics.
They probe each other as they conversed about trifling things. No doubt, the miniature of the Inner Palace extends from there.

(And they look so gentle too. Truly consorts.)

A middle-ranked consort from the west was talking to Consort Gyokuyou.
Though she didn't know the specifics, it seemed that Consort Gyokuyou's parent's home would be an important place after this, no matter what relation it will become.
It is common for many of the other consorts to inadvertently spill out information when they chat with the cheerful Consort Gyokuyou.
Writing up a letter on that, was one of Consort Gyokuyou's jobs.

(Even though she stayed up till very late last night. Could it be she can't sleep?)

The emperor frequently visits the Favoured Consort, Gyokuyou's place for three days. He comes to see his daughter who started to walk with help, but well, it goes without saying that is not the only reason he comes to visit.
He asks about various lively topics to not neglect the afternoon job too.

At the end of the tea party, she received a huge amount of tea snacks from Infa. She was going to eat them, but there were just too much. So, she sent them forward to Shaoran as usual.

Shaoran, who occasionally spoke with a lisp, talked to her about rumours, keeping her up to date as usual.

About the maidservant who committed suicide. Her relation to poisoning incident. And, for some reason, about the Pure Consort.

“Well, age is just age for the Four Consorts.”

Consort Gyokuyou is nineteen. Consort Rifa is twenty-three. Consort Riishu is fourteen.

Consort Ah Duo, the Pure Consort, was thirty-five. One year older than the emperor.

Consort Ah Duo is still able to give birth to children, but based on the Inner Palace system, her cushion must be slipping.
In other words, it is impossible for her to become the empress dowager hereafter.

It seems that the talks of her stepping down for a new high ranked consort had come up.

It was something that had come up quite a while ago. She had been a consort since the time the emperor was the crown prince, and had been the mother to a male infant once, so she had a considerably strong start.

(Was she the mother of the male infant who died previously?)

At this rate, would Consort Rifa end up the same way, having fallen pregnant with the emperor’s child too?
Not just that. It can’t be declared that Consort Gyokuyou will always continue to receive his favour.
After all, beautiful flowers too will someday become withered.

There is no meaning for the flowers of the Inner Palace to be truly tied together.

Although she had gotten accustomed to it, she thought that the Inner Palace was truly beneath the muddy dregs.

Maomao brushed off the crumbs of the mooncake she ate, and looked up to the heavy clouds that covered the sky.

The disposition of today's tea party companion had changed a little.

The companion was Consort Riishu, a member of the Four Consorts just like Consort Gyokuyou.
It was rare to have a tea party with a consort with the same rank, especially so for high ranked consorts.

The youthful Consort Riishu had looked nervous, and brought along four maids with her.
That food taster was also there.
It seems that she didn't receive punishment, as far as Maomao's worry was concerned.

As it was cold outside, the tea party was taken inside.
The eunuchs were used to prepare a couch for the maids in the parlour.
There was a round table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The curtains were exchanged with a new embroidered one.

Honestly, they didn't pay this much attention when the emperor visited, but it would be women who would stand on guard against the same gender.
The make-up was also imbued with fighting spirit. Maomao's usual freckle make-up was cleared off. The corners of her eyes were lined with red, as if to intimidate.

Maybe it was wisdom from age; Consort Gyokuyou was talking constantly and Consort Riishu did nothing else save nod timidly.
The maids who were waiting behind wasn't looking at their own master. Rather, they glanced around the room as if they were

curious about the furniture in the Jade Palace.
Only the food taster stood behind the consort in a way that she was facing Maomao. Before, she had looked at Maomao, who was threatened, imploringly.

(This is somehow…)

She would prefer that these maids and the maids from the Crystal Palace would stop treating her like a monster.

(They look like very normal maids at a glance.)

Maomao had previously reported to Gaoshun that they bullied their consort. It would be slightly troubling if she was mistaken, but it would be a happy thing.

Maomao, comparing them with the select few Jade Palace maids with a peek, thought their movements were slow, but they did their job. Well, since today's tea party host was Consort Gyokuyou, their work itself was scarce.

Airan brought in a ceramic jar and hot water.

"You like sweet things, right? Since it's cold today, I thought maybe we could have this."

"I like sweet things."

At Consort Gyokuyou's words, Consort Riishu replied.

The content of the jar was citrus peel boiled in honey. It warms the body and soothes the throat.

(Oh?)

Even though she just said she liked sweet things, Consort Riishu paled.
The food taster, who was looking at the honey that was being

poured into the bowl, also seemed like she wanted to say something.

(Is honey also no good?)

The maids waiting at the back were saying nothing.
They were just looking at Consort Riishu with amazed faces. As if to say, ‘stop being picky’.

Maomao let out a small breath and whispered into Consort Gyokuyou’s ear.

Consort Gyokuyou, widened her eyes with an ‘oh my’, and called for Airan.

“I’m sorry. This looks like it needs a little more time to pickle. We took out the wrong thing. Can you drink ginger soup?”

“Yes. That’s fine.”

Her complexion somewhat returned to normal. It seemed changing the tea was the correct answer.

And so, Maomao’s guess unfortunately turned out to be true as well.

Though it was for an instant, she met the gaze of the maid who faced her with a bored look.

Appearing in the evening was the usual beautiful eunuch. Following along at the back of the celestial maiden’s smile was Gaoshun. Recently, she thought the wrinkles on his brows have increased, but perhaps it increased no matter what anxiety he had.

“You had the tea party with Consort Riishu, didn’t you.”

“Indeed. It was fun.”

This eunuch seemed to rotate around to the Four Consorts at fixed intervals. Maybe he had the standpoint of one who supervises the inner palace.

Today's tea party gathering was somehow strange, but it seemed that this guy was involved with it.
Before she got caught into something troublesome, Maomao was going to withdraw from the room, but of course, she was stopped.

"Shall we talk?"

"The talk is already over."

Even if the celestial maiden's gaze was looking at her, Maomao could only lower her gaze at the floor. She was sure she was making the eyes of a dead fish.

"Ufufu, you're quite good friends."

"Gyokuyou-sama, it's good to massage around your eyes when you have eyestrain."

Because Consort Gyokuyou was laughing so merrily, she unintentionally replied with sarcasm.
Not good. Not good.
If she said something rude, she would be stopped by Jinshi.*

"Did you hear that the perpetrator of the poisoning assassination commotion the other day was the maid who committed suicide?"

She nodded. From his tone, he was talking to Maomao, not Consort Gyokuyou.

Consort Gyokuyou looked like she noticed something and left the room herself.
Remaining in the room was just Maomao, Jinshi, and Gaoshun.

"Did the perpetrator really commit suicide?"

“The one who decided that wasn’t me.”

The power of an influential person can change lies into truth. They didn’t know who it was who laid down the decision, but Jinshi should have some considerable influence to do that.

“I’m like the maidservant at best, but was there a reason to poison the Virtuous Consort’s dish?”*

“I don’t know myself.”

Jinshi smiled. He could use people aptly using that alluring smile.

Unfortunately, it was ineffective on Maomao. Even if he did such a thing, he should know that she can’t refuse if he ordered her.

“Will you come assist me at the Pomegranate Palace from tomorrow?”

Even if he phrased it as a question, what does it become? Maomao could only reply with “By your will”.

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Chapter 30: Honey (2)

It can be said that the residences are painted in the styles of their owners.
There was the family oriented Consort Gyokuyou's Jade Palace.
There was the refined nobility of Consort Rifa's Crystal Palace.

And the Pomegranate Palace, which Consort Ah Duo resided in, was practical.
It was a simple structure, lacking in excessive decoration. In a way, it brought about another type of refinement.

Its owner, Consort Ah Duo, was exactly that type of person.

Her appearance was stripped bare of needless things. She wasn't gorgeous, voluptuous, nor charming. However, this resulted in giving her an androgynous imposing beauty.

(And she was thirty-five years old?)

She could be mistaken as a young civil officer if she wore official robes. Just how much envy does she get from court ladies in this Inner Palace, which only has court ladies and eunuchs? Jinshi's charm seem fake in comparison to her.
Maomao didn't see what outfit the consort wore at the banquet, but a barbarian's horse riding outfit would be more fitting than the long sleeves and shirt she is wearing today.

Maomao was guided into the palace with two other court ladies.

The head maid, Fonmin, a mild-mannered plump beauty, promptly described the interior of the residence. It turns out the reason they were called was because they didn't have enough hands for their end of year spring cleaning.

(Is she wounded?)

She noted with a fleeting glance that Fonmin's left arm was wrapped in bandages.

Maomao's left arm was also bandaged in the same way. She had been tired of the reserved stares she got every time people noticed her old scars.

The day ended with her only airing out the furniture and books. The manual labour had been left to the eunuchs.
As this residence had been lived in the longest in the Inner Palace, it had more things than the Jade Palace.

She didn't return to the Jade Palace, and slept huddled together with the remaining two maidservants in the Pomegranate Palace's large room. It was cold, so the beast furs they were provided were very warm.

(They don't tell people what to do.)

Maomao immersed herself into just cleaning up as the head maid instructed.

Seeing as how the plump head maid was praising her so happily, she couldn't bring herself to slack off from the job.
A good wife would be the sort of woman who has fun from working. Fonmin was that kind of maid.

It had been so long since she worked so hard.
She fell into a deep sleep, curled up like a cat.

(Is there really a mastermind for the poisoning assassination commotion?)

The maids of the Jade Palace were hard workers, but she had to admit that the maids of the Pomegranate Palace were capable as well.
Everyone adored Consort Ah Duo, and that showed through the care they took to perform their jobs.
The head maid Fonmin, especially, was a wonder.

She is not constrained to the role of a lady's maid. If she ever finds dust, she will use a dust cloth to clean it up.
At the very least, it was unthinkable for a head maid who serves a high rank consort. Even the hardworking Honnyan will leave this to the other maids.

(I want to show this to the Crystal Palace maids who are only good at lip service.)

Consort Rifa just wasn't lucky with her maids. It can be said that the reason why she was surrounded by lots of useless maid was because each of their workloads are little. And despite this, they were good-for-nothings as they were only good at talk.
Well, being one who can be single-handedly responsible for all these maids can say that she had the talent of the one who stands on top though.

However, their strong loyalty was also related to their reasons for the poisoning as well.

The reason a consort is taken down from their Four Consort seat is because the high officials want their own daughters to enter.
If she steps down, she could become Consort Ah Duo, but what would happen if the other high rank consort seats became vacated?

Leaving Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa aside, it is likely that the emperor doesn't go to Consort Riishu's place.

(He prefers them voluptuous, after all.)

Consort Riishu has yet to fulfil the consort's role.

Still, the young Consort Riishu would hope for that. Be as it may that she has reached marriageable age, but supposing she gets pregnant at fourteen years of age, there will be a considerably large burden to her body when she gives birth. The discussions itself are also severe. Well, with this point, thinking about how she met the previous emperor is inconsiderate so let's stop it here.

It wouldn't be strange to hear about Consort Riishu being the target of dropping.

Maomao's thoughts churned as she tidied the kitchen shelves.

She saw that there were many small jars were lined up on the shelf. A sweet scent reached her nose.

"What do I do with this?"

"Ahh, those. Please return them to their original spots after you wipe the shelf."

She asked the maid who was cleaning with her in the kitchen. The maidservants who came together with her to assist yesterday were each cleaning in the bathroom and living room respectively.

"All of this is honey?"

"That's right. Fonmin-sama's family are beekeepers."

"It's no wonder then."

Honey is a luxury item. It's a good thing if you have one type, arranging a great number of them is like that huh. When she checked the contents, the colours were different, ranging from amber, reddish-brown to brown. When the variety of flowers it is harvested from is different, the taste is also different.

(What?)

Speaking of honey, there was something about it.
Something she had heard about recently.

"Once you're done, can you go wipe the handrails on the second floor? I completely forget the cleaning tools.*"

"I understand."

Maomao put away the honey and went up to the second floor

with the dust cloth in hand.

(Honey. Honey.)

As she carefully wiped down the handrail pillars one by one, she organised her thoughts.
She reviewed everything that happened recently.

(!?)

The outside could be seen clearly from the second floor. She saw a person, who was intending to hide, visiting the Pomegranate Palace.

(Consort Riishu?)

Only the food taster girl was with her. Why is she in such a place?

Maomao didn't understand at all.

(Honey….)

The memories from the tea party from a few days ago resurfaced. Why, Consort Riishu didn't like honey.

That incident just became strangely curious.

Borrowing the parlour of the Jade Palace, Maomao carried out her report on the Pomegranate Palace to Jinshi.

"And so, everything I have said up to now, I did not understand."

The things she didn't understand, she didn't understand.
Maomao wasn't underestimating herself, but she wasn't overestimating herself either.
She honestly conveyed that to the beautiful eunuch.

The results of her entering the Pomegranate Palace for three days.

Jinshi was elegantly sprawled on the couch, enjoying foreign tea that had a sweet aroma. He squeezed in lemon and mixed in honey.

“Is that so, that is how it is.”

“Indeed. It is like that.”

Recently she felt the beautiful eunuch’s tone was strangely casual, though it’s good that he wasn’t as sparkly as before. The sweetness in his voice had vanished. Maybe it was because she could sense he was like a teenager.

Maomao didn’t know what he is requesting of her, but she was very much a *normal* pharmacist. He can’t expect her to play spy.

“Well then, let me return you a question. Hypothetically, if there is a certain person who can contact the outside with a special method, who would it be?”

(Again with that unpleasant way of asking questions.)

Maomao didn’t like to speak out about her groundless thoughts. She was taught to never speak from speculation.

Maomao, with her eyes closed, took a deep breath. She must calm down, or she might end up looking at the celestial maiden-like young man like she would look at a dead frog.

Gaoshun, as usual, was desperately appealing about something to her with his eyes.

“I’m talking about possibility, but if there is, it could only be the head maid Fonmin.”

“Your basis being?”

“Her left arm is bandaged. I saw her replacing her bandage once. I saw burn scars.”

It was the incident with the wooden slips dipped in drug solutions

from before. She had recognised it to be a cipher, but she didn't speak out.

She thought of the possibility of burn injury on the arm from the robe with the burnt sleeve that had wrapped the wooden slips. Needless to say, Jinshi had investigated that. And then made Maomao play spy.

Though, honestly, she couldn't see that gentle maid doing something, but that was only Maomao's personal opinion. Looking at it objectively, she couldn't reach the right answer.

"Well, you get a passing mark."

Jinshi suddenly looked at the small bottle left on the table. Then he looked at Maomao, his smile saccharine.

She could sense something squirming just beneath that smile.

All of Maomao's hairs stood up in an instant.
She had a horribly unpleasant premonition.

He picked up the small bottle, and came towards Maomao.

"You need to reward good children, right."

"I decline."

"It's okay to not decline."

"I'm good, so please give it to someone else."

She constantly shot death stares towards him telling him to cut it out, but he made no sign of stopping.
He slowly shortened the distance. Because she kept retreating inch by inch, her back soon hit the wall.

She sought help from Gaoshun, but the taciturn attendant was

sitting by the window, gazing at the birds flying in the sky. As he was unusually settled, it was rather annoying.

(I'll serve him a laxative later.)

Jinshi, with a smile that would enchant anyone, slipped his fingers inside the small bottle. His finger came away with a generous amount of honey.
Harassment is serious.

"Do you like sweet things?"

"I prefer to drink."

"But, you do eat it, right?"

No intention on stopping, his finger neared Maomao's mouth. He looked at Maomao's glaring eyes with a look of fascination.

(Come to think of it, he's that kind of humanpervert.)

Should she take this as an order from him, and obediently open her mouth? Or should she escape by any means to preserve her pride?

(If this is wolfsbane honey at least, I'll understand.)

The honey of poisonous flowers is poison. It will cause food poisoning, mixed in with the honey.

At that, something connected in Maomao's head.
She wanted to set her thoughts in order, but with that pervert's finger persistently closing in on her, she couldn't think of anything.

Just when his finger was in her mouth.

"What are you doing to my maid(child)?"

A displeased Consort Gyokuyou stood there. Honnyan stood behind her, at her wit's end.

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Chapter 31: Honey (3)

“Jinshi-sama didn’t mean to go overboard with his prank. Can you forgive him?”

Gaoshun was guiding her to the Diamond Palace, Consort Riishu’s residence. His master, due to the incident just then, was at the Jade Palace getting severely lectured by Consort Gyokuyou.

“I understand. Then, it’ll be fine if Gaoshun-sama does the licking from now on.”

“L, licking….”

“It’s fine if you understand.”

Maomao walked briskly, pouting.

He was truly a pervert. A nasty person with only looks.
No doubt he deceived everyone like that.
Extremely shameless.

If he wasn’t a big shot, she would have kicked him between the legs. Or so she thought, but there was no point kicking something that wasn’t there, so she decided to let it go.

And so like this, they reached the brand new palace that was set up under the southern sky.

Consort Riishu was dressed in a sakura-coloured dress. Her soft hair was bundled up with a flower *kanzashi*.
Maomao thought that this cute outfit suited her more than the extravagant outfit she wore at the garden party.

After Consort Gyokuyou entered, Maomao asked her for permission to meet with Consort Riishu to clarify something she was curious about.

Consort Riishu, noticing that Jinshi was not around, looked clearly dejected.
Only his outward appearance is good, so it can't be helped.

"The thing you want to talk to me about, what it is?"

She was eased comfortably on the couch, covering her mouth with a fan. She didn't have the majestic bearing like the other consorts. Hesitating somewhere, the consort who was still young. She only had the beauty expressing a beautiful maiden. She has yet to express a womanly charm.

Behind her were two of her personal maids, standing listlessly.

Consort Riishu had looked at the court lady with freckles she's never seen before with displeasure, but upon taking a closer look, she seemed to notice that Maomao was the maid she saw at the garden party. Her eyes widened, and she looked a little calmer.

"Do you hate honey?"

It would have been fine to follow up with some small talk, but that was a pain so she went straight to the point.

"How did you know?"

"It shows in your expression."

(You know with just a look.)

Her bewildered look gradually turned sulky. She was really easy to read.

"Was there ever a time you got stomach aches from honey in the past?"

Moreover, Consort Rishuu puffed out her cheeks. Further affirming Maomao's guess. [T/N: not too sure about this one,

literally it says '…expanded her face.']

"It isn't unusual to become unable to take in food after food poisoning."

Consort Riishu, having been seen through, made a face that was a mix of bewilderment and irritation.

"Aren't you rude. Suddenly coming here, and speaking so bluntly to Riishu-sama."

(You're one to say?)

She was one of the maids who didn't stick up to her honey-hating master at the tea party the other day.

(By doing this, she's acting as an ally.)

Sometimes, they pretend to be allies of Consort Riishu to make outsiders into villains. The young consort, who was ignorant of the ways of the world, is convinced that everyone is her enemy. They persuade the consort into thinking that only they are the consort's ally, and make her isolated.
The consort then has no choice but to depend on her maids. It is a vicious circle.

If the person herself didn't noticed that she was being bullied, there was no means this will be known to the public. It seemed they overdid it at the garden party though.

"I am here under Jinshi-sama's orders. Do you have a problem with that?"

While she was at it, let's borrow the tiger's authority and make some trouble.
Doing this much should be fine.

The maids flushed furiously, for some reason they were looking forward to get close to that perverted eunuch .

"And one more thing."

Maomao, expressionlessly, returned Consort Riishu's gaze.

"Are you ever acquainted with the Pomegranate Palace's head maid before?"

Her surprised expression was answer enough.

○●○

"They have what she asked me to look for."

At Maomao's behest, Gaoshun was in the Imperial Court's Archives.
Maomao, who was an Inner Palace court lady, is fundamentally unable to leave the Inner Palace.

Let's see. What did she realise?

Her composure and her unexpected knowledge beyond her seventeen years was astonishing. He thought, with her rational way of thinking, and her ability to deal with things, it was regrettable that she was a girl. Of course, this talk excludes one part of her characteristic though.

She was a chess piece that was extremely easy to use.

It would have been fine to treat her like so.
The person herself had accepted it too, albeit reluctantly.

"I did something bad."

He grumbled to himself.

Should he have really stopped his master's overboard prank? What would have happened if he stopped it?

Recalling Maomao's resentful eyes, anxiety swept past him. She might serve him something from now on.

○●○

(Sixteen years ago. He was born at the same time as the emperor's brother huh)

In Maomao's hand was a single volume of a book bound in cord. It was a compilation of every incident from the Inner Palace. Gaoshun had brought it over to her at her request.

A single child was born when the current emperor was the crown prince. The mother was the crown prince's milk sibling, the future Pure Consort.

The child died in infancy, and afterwards, until the new Inner Palace was made at the previous emperor's death, no child was born.

(The consort from the crown prince's time was always alone huh)

It was surprising. She thought that as he was lusty old man he would have many concubines from his crown prince days. To think that he was married to one consort for more than ten years.

Absolutely, it is also necessary to not rely on rumours and hearsay, but accurately recorded information.

Sixteen years ago.

Infant deceased.

And then.

"Medical Officer, Ruomen, banished."

She discovered a name she recognised.
The emotion that surfaced wasn't surprise but understanding. Some

way or other, she already had a feeling about it.

All the medicinal herbs that grew in large numbers in the Inner Palace were something that Maomao used often.
They don't grow in nature. She guessed that someone had transplanted them before.

"Dad, what did you do?"

The man who dragged along with a gait of an old woman. Maomao's medicine teacher was an ex-eunuch with a bone in one of his knees extracted.

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Chapter 32: Honey (4)

“A message from Consort Gyokuyou?”

“That’s right. She told me to personally deliver it.”

“Ah Duo-sama is out for a tea party though.”

The plump head maid, Fonmin looked at Maomao, troubled.

Maomao opened the letterbox she presented. Inside, instead of a document, was a small bottle and one red trumpet-shaped flower. A sweet scent she was used to smelling came from the bottle.

As for what that was, it seemed Fonmin knew as well. Her shoulders gave a twitch.

“There is something I want to talk to Fonmin-sama about.”

“I understand.”

Fonmin, with a stiff expression, invited Maomao into the Pomegranate Palace.

The makeup of Fonmin’s room was roughly the same as Honnyan’s room, but for some reason, the baggage was compacted to the corner of the room. It was like she was done with packing.

(I knew it.)

They faced each other in the room she was invited into with the round table between them. There was crude tea that warmed the body, and hard bread accompanied it as teacakes. Fruits boiled in honey hung overhead.

“Just what’s happening? The spring cleaning was already good enough.”

Though her tone was gentle, she said it searchingly.

“That’s right. When will you be made to move?”

Maomao glanced at the baggage left in the corner of the room.

“Your judgement is good.”

The spring cleaning was the surface reason.
Together with the new year greeting, in order to receive the new Four Consort, Consort Ah Duo must leave this palace.

A consort who cannot give birth at the Inner Palace is unneeded.
It was the same even for a consort who was married for a long time.
Consort Ah Duo didn’t have a strong backing.
Being milk siblings with the emperor – a relation deeper than actual blood ties – had probably maintained her position up until now.

At least, if the male infant who was born was still alive, Consort Ah Duo would have stuck out her chest largely.

(Probably, Consort Ah Duo is….)

The gallant figure that was like a young man. That wasn’t a feminine aura.
It was as if, the woman had become something close to a eunuch.

She hated talking about speculation.
But, if she had conviction, she could only speak out.

“Consort Ah Duo can’t give birth anymore.”

“….”

Her silence was an affirmation.
Fonmin’s expression quickly stiffened.

“Something happened during childbirth.”

“That is unrelated to this.”

The middle-aged head maid narrowed her eyes.

That wasn't the helpful, gentle woman. Hostility burned in her eyes.

"It is related to this. The one who was at the place of childbirth, was my foster father(dad)."

Fonmin stood up and expressionlessly looked at Maomao who had informed her the truth.

The Inner Palace was always shorthanded on medical officers. The quack doctor was doing as much as he could in his current position to continue to remain.
It was unnecessary to especially become a eunuch while holding the special position of a medical officer. This was what happened to her unskilled dad; he was probably gently pressured to become one.

"Wasn't the unfortunate thing was that it overlapped with the birth of the emperor's younger brother? Because of where the scales tipped, Consort Ah Duo's child-birthing was postponed."

At the end of a difficult birth, the child was born with no issues, but Consort Ah Duo's womb was lost.
And then, the child too, passed away young.

Though in the same way as the previous poisonous face powder incident, it was questioned whether Consort Ah Duo made her child pass away due to that.

"Does Fonmin-sama feel responsible for that? At that time, the one who assisted on behalf of the Consort Ah Duo who was disgraced after childbirth should be you."

"You know anything. You're just the daughter of the quack who couldn't even help Ah Duo-sama."

"I guess so."

The unavoidable words, wasn't to clear up the medical treatment. It was her dad's words.

Resigned to be slandered as a quack, he was that type of person.

“I was sure that quack prohibited the use of face powder that contained white lead. Because of that, the intelligent you did not let the babies die.”

Maomao opened the small bottle that was in the letter box. The viscous honey sparkled. Maomao put the red flower that was in it in her mouth.
It tasted like sweet honey. She held the flower, twirled it around with her finger.

“A lot of flowers have poison. Like Aconite and Renge Azalea. There is poison in their honey.”

“I know.”

“I thought so.”

It wasn’t strange for her to have that knowledge if her family ran beekeeping.
She wouldn’t give poison that would cause poisoning symptoms to adults to a baby.

“But you didn’t know that just mixed in honey is still an effective poison for babies.”

It wasn’t speculation. It was conviction.
Though it was rare, there is that sort of poison. It was only effective to babies with weak constitutions.

“It was fine even when you tasted for poison. You never thought that the medicine you gave to nourish the baby would completely backfire on you.”

And so, Consort Ah Duo’s child ceased to breathe.
The cause of death was viewed as a mystery.

At the time, her father who used to be the medical officer, Ruomen, was banished from the Inner Palace due to his frequent

mistakes, together with the treatment at the time of childbirth. As a physical punishment, the bone of one of his knees was extracted.

“You didn’t want her know. Consort Ah Duo.”

That she herself was the cause who killed her master’s only child.

“That’s why you thought to make Consort Riishu disappear.”

Consort Riishu became emotionally attached to Consort Ah Duo, who was the older daughter in law, during the era of the previous emperor.
Consort Ah Duo was affectionate to Consort Riishu.
A young girl who was far from home, and a woman who couldn’t have children. A type of co-dependency was born.

However, suddenly, one day Consort Riishu was rejected by Consort Ah Duo. No matter how many time she came to see her, she was chased out by Fonmin.
And so, just like this, the previous emperor died, and Consort Riishu retired into religion.

“Consort Riishuu told you that there was poison in the honey, right.”

If Consort Riishu continued to come, she might talk about that. The inquisitive Consort Ah Duo might notice something from those words.
Fonmin just wanted to avoid that.

The girl who retired to religion, and never thought she would meet a second time, appeared back in the Inner Palace again.

This time as the same high-rank consort.
This time with the position to drive off Consort Ah Duo.

And yet, that shameless young girl came to meet Consort Ah Duo as if to seek a mother.
A young girl who couldn’t read the atmosphere, who was ignorant of the ways of the world.

That's why she thought to make her disappear.

The gentle, helpful head maid wasn't there. Instead, a woman faced her with a cold stare.

"What do you want?"

"I don't need that kind of thing."

Maomao felt a tingling sensation on the back of her neck.
On the shelf behind Fonmin was the knife that was used to cut the bread before.
Fonmin only needed to stretch her arms out to reach for it.

"Anything is fine."

"Doesn't Fonmin-sama yourself know that type of thing is pointless?"

A few days ago, she reported what she investigated from the book to Jinshi.
Maomao cannot hide secrets from that eunuch who oversees the Inner Palace. Like the time with Fuyou-hime, she didn't think she can deceive him.
She must not deceive him.

Jinshi will catch Fonmin if he heard Maomao's talk.
And then, capital punishment will be unavoidable.
The truth from sixteen years ago will come to light.

That's why, even if Maomao disappeared here, it will be the same.
Sooner or later, it would be exposed.

The smart head maid should understand that.

What Maomao can do, is only one thing.

Not to hope for a reduction in penalty, nor to speak of dealing with Consort Ah Duo.

Only to decide which one out of the two possible motives. To just continue hiding that motive from Consort Ah Duo.

“The result will not change. So if that’s alright with you.”

Please accept my proposal, she said.

(So tired.)

Maomao returned to her room in the Jade Palace, and collapsed into her hard bed.

Her clothes were sticky with sweat. The clinging scent from the perspiration from the tension was strong, quite stinky. She wanted to take a bath.

At least she could change. She took off her outer garment. The area around her chest to her belly was wrapped in cloth. It was fixed with oiled paper that was layered repeatedly over it.

“It’s good that this wasn’t necessary.”

(It would have hurt if I got stabbed.)

Maomao peeled off the oiled paper, and put on a fresh change of clothes.

○●○

“And so, Fonmin surrendered.”

“That’s good.”

The blunt maid spoke, especially nonchalantly.

Jinshi had his elbows on the table. He ignored Gaoshun who only faced him when there was something he wanted to say. He wanted to say that his manners were bad.

“Do you know anything?”

“What kind of thing?”

“It seemed like you randomly got Gaoshun to gather up books though.”

“Indeed. It became useless in the end.”

As if she was treating him like a fool, she indifferently brushed it off.*
As usual, she faced him as though she was looking at filthy mud. It was much more refreshing once you look past the rudeness.

“The motive is as you said. It was to maintain the Four Consort seat.”

“Is that so.”

She looked at him with absolutely no interest at all.

“It’s unfortunate, but it was determined that Consort Ah Duo will step down from being a high-rank consort. She will leave the Inner Palace and will now live in the Southern Villa.”

“Is that because of this incident?”

Maomao asked in return.
It seemed the cat finally expressed interest in the gold.

“Nah, it was decided from the start. The emperor’s decision.”

Was she being enclosed in the villa without returning home because she was the love of many years?
It was unusual for Maomao to ask something out of interest. He got unintentionally elated.

When he initiated a step closer toward her, for some reason, she

put herself on guard and retreated half a step.
I told you so, Gaoshun gave him a look of amazement.

Was she still holding a grudge on the trivial prank from the other day?

Jinshi was quite bothered that he was being guarded against. He sat back down on the chair.

The short court lady dipped her head. Though she was going to leave, her footsteps suddenly halted.
There was a decoration with a branch of a red trumpet shaped flower.

“Honnyan decorated just then.”

“I see. It’s blooming offseason.”

Maomao, taking the flower, held onto the stem and put it in her mouth.

Jinshi tilted his head. He slowly inched close and copied Maomao.

“It’s sweet.”

“It’s poisonous though.”

He spat it out and covered his mouth. Gaoshun came forward with a pitcher of water.

“You won’t die so it’s fine.”

The odd girl, who was licking her lips, gave a faint sweet smile.

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Chapter 33: Consort Ah Duo

It was really by chance that Maomao couldn't sleep and slipped out the Jade Palace in the middle of the night.
The Pure Consort was leaving the Inner Palace tomorrow.

She went outside for some reason and was walking about aimlessly. The coldness wasn't to the point of freezing but it was already winter so she went out wearing two padded layers.

The Inner Palace, as ever, is overflowing with rather unhealthy love. She must take care to not mistakenly peek in the thickets and concealed places.

Suddenly, as she saw the half-moon in the sky, she recalled Fuyou-hime. Seeing as she had the opportunity, she decided to ascend the outer wall. She wanted to fancy that she had moon viewing wine since she was already doing it, but she gave up on it as there wasn't any at the Jade Palace. She was in the mood for some viper wine; it's been a while.

She wedged her foot on the section of the brick that protruded at the corner of the outer wall, and skilfully clambered up. As her skirt might hook onto something, she had to pay extra care to it.

Anyhow, as far as smoke goes, the moon and stars lit up the city, so of course high places are pleasant. The bright lights she could see in the distance should be the prostitution quarter. It was appropriate that it was called the night quarter. No doubt the chat between the flower and the bees are starting.

Not planning to do anything, she sat over the edge of the wall, and decided to look at the sky while swinging her legs.

"Oh, there's someone here before me?"

She heard a voice that was neither high or low.

She turned around. There was a gallant young man wearing trousers standing there.
No, she thought it was a young man, but it was Consort Ah Duo. Her hair flowed down her back with a single bun. A large gourd hung down from her shoulders.

“Well, it’s empty.”

“That’s fine. Wanna join me for a cup?”

She displayed sake cups, and Maomao couldn’t find a reason to decline.
She was going to refuse as she would normally would with Consort Gyokuyou, but it wouldn’t be uncouth to keep company for her final evening drink in the Inner Palace.

Both hands bearing the sake cup, she received the unrefined sake. It tasted of strong sweetness and low alcohol content.

Not planning to chat, she savoured the sake slowly to make it last. Consort Ah Duo heartily drank from the gourd.

“I’m like a man, right?”

“You look like one when you behave like that.”

“Haha, you’re an honest person.”

Consort Ah Duo raised one knee, and placed her chin on it. Maomao recognised her fine nose bridge and the long eyelashes that lined her eyes from somewhere. She thought she looked like someone, but her mind was muddled.

“Because I lost my son with these hands, I was always the emperor’s friend. No, we might have returned to being friends.”

She was close to him as a friend, not behaving as a consort. They had been childhood friend that have been together since they were babies.

She didn’t think she would be chosen as a consort.
Just that she was only chosen as an instructor as his first partner.

That she was an ornamental consort for ten-odd years due to sympathy.
She should have just handed it over earlier.
Why did he continue to cling onto her?

Consort Ah Duo continued her monologue.
She continued as if Maomao, who was right there, wasn't there and there wasn't no one else around.

The consort who will leave tomorrow.
No matter what kind of rumours that would come out of the Inner Palace; it is already unrelated to her.

Maomao just kept silent and listened.

Consort Ah Duo stopped her words. She got up, upending the gourd and the contents spilled outside the wall into the moat.

Seeing the sake that was being poured as if it was a farewell gift, Maomao recalled the maidservant who committed suicide the other day.

"It must have been cold in the water."

"I guess so."

"I wonder if it hurt."

"I guess so"

"She was a fool."

"…that might be true."

"Everyone is a fool."

"That might be true."

She somehow understood.
That maidservant really did commit suicide.

And, Consort Ah Duo did know about that.

The everyone she was talking about, probably also included Fonmin.

Regardless of Consort Ah Duo's intention, there are people who will expend their life for her sake.

(It's really a waste.)

Even though she possessed the character and qualifications of one who stands above the people.
If she was beside the emperor, not as a consort but in another form, would the government be even better?

As she thought of such absurd things, Maomao gazed at the white moon.

There were many onlookers gathered at the main gate.

The ex-consort who had lived in the Inner Palace for an extremely long time, was wearing large sleeves and a skirt, different to last night, that really didn't really fit her.

Some of the court ladies around her were biting their handkerchiefs.
No doubt the consort that looked like a gallant young man was an object of admiration for the young court ladies.

Jinshi stood in front of Consort Ah Duo, accepting something. It was the coronet that was proof of the Pure Consort. This, in a moment, will passed onto another woman.

(It would be better if they swapped clothes.)

The features that was like a celestial maiden, and the features that was like a gallant young man. Though the two looked completely different, she strangely felt that they resembled each other.
Last night, it seemed that person who she thought resembled Consort Ah Duo was Jinshi.

If Consort Ah Duo was in Jinshi's position, what would happen? It was a completely absurd thought.

Consort Ah Duo's behaviour wasn't like a miserable woman who was driven out of the Inner Palace at all.
She had the majestic bearing of one who looked accomplished, having pridefully fulfilled her job.

Suddenly, inevitable speculation sprang into her mind.

Why was she that dignified?
She didn't accomplish the consort's duty.

'*I lost my son with my own hands*.'

She recalled Consort Ah Duo's words from yesterday.

(Lost? Not dead?)

From the way she grasped it, it could be also taken as he was still alive.

The reason Consort Ah Duo didn't give birth was because it overlapped with the empress dowager's childbirth. The emperor's younger brother and the consort's child had the relation of uncle and nephew. Furthermore, having been born at roughly the same time, wouldn't they could resemble each other like twins.

(What if they were switched?)

Consort Ah Duo should know it deeply during the time of the

childbirth. Of which one of the two babies will be raised carefully from now on.
It wasn't Consort Ah Duo's, who was the daughter of the wet nurse, who would get the greater protection, it would be empress dowager's.

The consort Ah Duo who had a difficult recovery after childbirth, probably couldn't make a judgement on what is right.
However, if her own son was saved because of the swapping, that was Consort Ah Duo's desire.

If this was exposed in the future.
If it was after the real emperor's younger brother died.

Her dad wasn't just banished, he also received physical punishment. Because he realised that they were swapped.

Even about the emperor's younger brother's narrow standpoint.

Even the reason the manly Consort Ah Duo continued to remain in the Inner Palace.

(This is truly absurd.)

Maomao shook her head.
It was a stupid fantasy. Even the three girls of the Jade Palace wouldn't make a leap in thoughts to this point.

(I can't stand to keep looking any longer.)

Just as Maomao was going to return to the Jade Palace, someone brushed past in a hurry in front of her.

A girl with young charming looks. It was Consort Riishu.

She ran towards the main gate, no signs of noticing Maomao.
That food taster woman was behind her, out of breath as she followed.

And behind them, not even running, were the rest of the maids who looked like they couldn't be bothered.

(They are just the same. Except for one person.)

Maomao wasn't going to do anything. There was no way she could live in this garden of women if she couldn't manage her own followers herself.

Only that, at least, she wasn't alone now.
That much should be better.

Consort Riishu, when she came before Consort Ah Duo, robotically stuck out her left arm and left leg at the same time. She tripped on the hem of her skirt, and fell down face first onto the ground.

At the Consort Riishu who looked as though she was about to cry at the sounds of the laughter around her, Consort Ah Duo wiped her face with a towel.
A maternal expression could be seen on the face of the gallant consort who was like a young man.

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Chapter 34: Dismissal

“What shall we do?”

The taciturn attendant passed the documents over to his master. It was a mind-bogglingly troubling subject.

“These are the register of names of everyone, including her family, related to the Fonmin incident from the other day.”

Fonmin was due for execution. Although family extermination will not be performed, her relatives will have all their assets dispossessed. There is a difference in severity, but all will be sentenced with physical punishment.
It was a blessing that Consort Ah Duo, her master, didn’t get any sentence.

Clients of her family’s trade were also included among the parties concerned. It was assumed that they were mere beekeeping farmers, but it seemed they operated on a considerably extensive scale.

“Eighty of those girls are in the Inner Palace.”

“What, eighty among two thousand people? That’s quite a hit ratio.”

“I suppose.”

Gaoshun asked his master who wrinkled his brows and came close.

“Shall we do a cover up?”

“Can you do it?”

“If you so desire.”

If you so desire.

Gaoshun will abide as Jinshi says.
It didn't matter whether it was correct. As Jinshi says it.

He sighed deeply.

A name that he was familiar with was reported among the parties concerned.
The party who was kidnapped and sold seemed to be a person related to the said incident.

"Well then, what must I do?"

It would be good if he could just simply decide.
Because of the action he chose, he was very scared of what kind of face that girl will make.

○●○

"A massive dismissal?"

"Dat's right."

Shaoran was eating dried persimmons as she said that. The dried persimmons were something Maomao made from stealing from the orchard and secretly hanging them under the roof.

"It's kiiinda like a family execution or something. That the girls from merchants who had dealings hafta quit or something."

(I have a somewhat bad feeling about this.)

Maomao's intuition is often right.
Her family on the official papers is a merchant that deals with trade. [T/N: i.e. the kidnappers who sold her.]

(It would be quite worrisome if I get dismissed now.)

She was pleased with her current lifestyle as it is.

Obviously, she would be happy if she could return to the prostitution quarter, but it would be downer to be caught by the madam who managed the money even if she returned.

After Rihaku, she has yet to send in honoured guests.
That is a problem.

(I'll certainly be sold.)

After Maomao parted from Shaoran, she decided to look for the person who she wouldn't think to normally go to meet.

"How rare. Your breathing is wild."

The lovely eunuch told her casually at the main gate of the inner palace.
This was after Maomao went through to all the residence of the four consorts, not just the the Jade Palace.

"…–"

"Calm down. Your face is red."

Jinshi looked at her somewhat impatiently with his celestial maiden face.

"I, I have, s, something to ask you."

Maomao spun her words in pieces.

Jinshi narrowed his eyes. For some reason, his face was suffused with gloominess.

"I get it. Let's talk inside."

She was shown into the Palace Official Chief's room. She felt bad for the Chief who was stuck with waiting in vain outside as usual. She bowed once and went inside.

"In any case, you must want to hear about the current massive

dismissal.”

“Yes. What will happen to me?”

Instead of replying, Jinshi got her to look at the documents. Maomao’s name was also among what was written on the high-quality paper.

“This means you will be dismissed.”

(What should I do?)

She wasn’t in the position to say, ‘please stop calling it a dismissal’. She repeatedly acknowledged she was a court lady at most.
She resisted looking at him with flatteringly, keeping her face expressionless. As a result, it became the usual face where she eyed him like she was looking at a pest.

“What’s wrong?”

The usual sweetness wasn’t in the inquiring voice. Instead, on the contrary he sounded slightly young, coaxing. Unlike his tone, only his face was firm with seriousness.

“I am just a court lady. As you say, if you command me to be a maidservant, a cook, even a food taster, I will do it.”

(That’s why, don’t dismissfire me.)

She intended to say, ‘employ me with the best of your ability’. The young man’s expression remained firm. He suddenly averted his eyes and made a small sigh.

“I get it. Let’s give a bonus to your severance payment*.”

The young man’s voice was cold. His downcast expression couldn’t be read.

Negotiations have failed.

○●○

How many consecutive days has it been till today has he seen his master irritated?
There was no problem about the current job. But he was so done with him sitting in the corner of the room, bringing about a gloomy air when he returned to his office.
Even spores that don't fly have more energy*.

The young man with a lovely celestial maiden's smile and a honey voice wasn't there.

Maomao left the following week with the dismissal notice. She wasn't social, but apparently, she politely went door to door thanking people for their help.
Consort Gyokuyou was hesitant, but when she heard it was what Jinshi decided, she withdrew. "What's done is done," she courteously left as a sharp parting remark.

"We should have held her back."

"Don't say anything."

Gaoshun folded his arms, the wrinkles on his brows deepening.

What was it like when he lost his favourite toy?
Even though he was given an even more new and unusual toy. How much has he troubled over it?

It was probably no good for him to be with the toy.
Jinshi didn't want to treat the girl as a tool and let her go. Even if he was assigned a new girl with a different disposition accordingly, what would become of it?

This was, as a matter of fact, a bother.

“If a substitute is no good, then we’ll have to prepare the real thing, don’t we.”

Jinshi muttered inaudibly, and suddenly recalled a certain person.

It was the military officer that the girl’s family knew very well.

“It will take some work.”

Gaoshun, the worldly-wise person, scratched the back of his head.

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Chapter 35: Eunuch and Prostitute

“You have work. Go.”

At the madam’s pestering, she was forced to ride a rather magnificent horse carriage.
Apparently, tonight’s job was a certain nobleman’s banquet.

The sighing Maomao was led to a large residence in the north of the capital.
There were her older sisters and several others. Everyone was dressed in beautiful clothes, faces applied with bewitching make-up.
Thinking that even she looked just like the others, she felt a little ill at ease for some strange reason.

They traversed the long hallway, climbed the spiral staircase, and were shown into a spacious room.

Lanterns hung down from the ceiling, red tassels swinging.
There were layers of beast furs piled on the red carpeted floor. That was where tonight’s customers were sitting.
The five people, who were lined up side by side, were younger than she thought.

Seeing the young men who were illuminated with the wavering flame, Pairin-neechan licked her lips. Joga-neechan, who was beside her, poked her side.

(Hurry up and introduce us.)

They were high officials who work in the Imperial Court.
Apparently, the referrer was Rihaku.

If Maomao had an affinity with Rihaku, her debt should decrease slowly.

Well, her severance payment she received paid more than she

expected. She didn't need to go as far as selling her body, and it was good this way that she is living with a part-time job.

(The hag clicked her tongue.)

Apparently, the madam really wanted Maomao to be a prostitute. For these couple of years, those actions had been obvious.
She had been told many times to stop playing pharmacist, but that was impossible. As her own interest lay in pharmacy, she had nothing towards singing and dancing.

(At any rate, they're filthy rich.)

It was priced even higher to summon prostitutes to the residence than to have the banquet at the brothel. On top of that, the ones they called were the popular prostitutes who could make one year's worth of silver disappear with a single night of alcohol pouring.
To think that they called the Rokushoukan's Three Princesses: Meimei, Pairin, and Joga, altogether.

Maomao was one of the several people who were brought along to support the Three Princesses.
Though she had done most of the training, she couldn't recite poetry, couldn't play the erhu, and dancing was just unreasonable.

At least she would keep the customer's cups from emptying. She didn't think she could just keep a close eye.

With a smile plastered on her face, she slowly poured alcohol into the empty vessel.
Everyone was in a daze at her older sisters' poetry and dancing. It was a relief that no one was looking her way.

(Oh? Is he bored?)

Even though everyone was lit up with smiles, drunk with alcohol and enjoying the dance performance. There was just one person who was looking down below.

The young man, who was clad in first-class cotton clothes, with one knee up, was pouring his own drink and gulping down alcohol. Only there was the atmosphere was clouded in grey.

(Did he lose his job?)

Maomao, who was in a strangely solemn place, held a full bottle of alcohol and sat down beside the gloomy man.

His glossy bangs concealed the upper half of his face.

“Leave me alone.”

(?)

Well. It sounded like a voice she heard before.
As she was thinking, her hands moved at the same time.
All questions of impoliteness and rudeness were gone from her mind.

Taking care to not touch the forehead of the man who was looking down, she gently raised his front bangs.

A beautiful face was exposed.
Irritation instantly changed into surprise.

“Jinshi-sama?”

Though there wasn’t that glittering smile, and his voice wasn’t sweet like honey, it was surely the eunuch she was familiar with.

Jinshi blinked several times. She couldn’t calm down at all from being stared at somewhat steadily.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I get that often.”

“Don’t tell me you’re disguised with make-up?”

“I get that often.”

She had a feeling that she had a similar conversation some time

ago.
She returned the bangs she was holding on back to their original position.

And in doing so, Jinshi stretched out his hand and held onto Maomao's.

"Why did you run away?"

He looked at her with a sulky face.

"Please don't touch the prostitute."

Those were the rules. She couldn't do anything about it. It will cost extra fees.

"Before that, what's with your get up?"

"I'm in the middle of part time work."

"At the brothel? …you don't mean, you?"

Understanding what Jinshi wanted to say, Maomao scowled at him with her eyes half-closed.
It was simply his character to suspect people's sense of virtue, apparently.

"Not really. I haven't snagged a customer. Not yet."

"Not yet…."

"…."

She couldn't answer back. Before repaying her remaining debt, there is certainly a chance of the madam forcing her to bring in guests.
With her dad and her older sisters' keeping that at bay, that was not an issue at present.

“Shall *I* buy you?” [T/N: *ore* again.]

“Hah?”

“Don’t joke–” she stopped mid-sentence as an idea suddenly crossed her.

“That might be good.”

“!?”

Jinshi gave a shocked expression.

Somehow, because he wasn’t sparkling today, he was rich in expressions. The celestial maiden’s smile was beautiful, but it was an expression that couldn’t be deemed as human.
She even occasionally wondered if he has two souls settled in one spirit.

“It wouldn’t be bad for me to work at the Inner Palace one more time.”

Jinshi’s shoulders slumped.
What’s wrong?

“Didn’t you quit because you hated that place?”

“When did I say such things?”

Even though she requested to continue working for the sake of repaying her debt, the one who dismissed her was this guy.
Although there were a lot of troublesome things, she was in quite favourable terms with Consort Gyokuyou’s maids. She didn’t think she would get used to thinking that she would do a rare post like food tasting.

“If I don’t like it, it’ll be to the point of not being able to do poison experiments.”

“You should really put a stop to that.”

Jinshi placed his chin on his raised knee. He made a bitter smile.

“That’s right. You are that kind of person huh”

“What is it? That.”

“Do people tell you that you don’t say enough?”

“…I get that often.”

His bitter smile gradually changed into an innocent one.

This time Maomao hung her head in sullenness. There, Jinshi reached out his hand.

“So why did you run away?”

“Those were the rules.”

Even though she said it, Jinshi wasn’t drawing back his extended hand.
He stared at Maomao in a clammy manner.

“Isn’t it fine if it’s just for a little bit?”

“You can’t.”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

“It’ll hurt my spirit.”

“Just one hand. It’ll be fine if it’s just fingers.”

“….”

Persistent. Come to think of this, this man was sticky.

She closed her eyes in surrender, and sighed deeply.

“Just your fingers then.”

Something pressed down on her lips.
She opened her eyes. There was red rouge on Jinshi’s long fingers.

As Maomao was caught dumbfounded, Jinshi drew back his fingers. And then, of all things, he gently placed it on his own lips.

(This jerk.)

He separated his two fingers, slightly transferring the rouge on his nicely shaped lips.
Jinshi crinkled his eyes, making an even more innocent smile. His cheeks were a light shade of sakura colour, like they were also spread with rouge.

Maomao’s shoulders shook, but Jinshi was facing her with his excessively innocent smile. She said nothing, hung her head, averting her eyes.

(Don’t we match.) [T/N: idk, there’s a pun here on *utsuru*. It’s got multiple meanings. I tl’ed it as ‘transfer’ and “spread’ for Jinshi, ‘match’ for Maomao. But if anyone has a better idea….]

Maomao, who was bound with her mouth jagged, her cheeks were becoming sakura coloured. She wasn’t even wearing cheek rouge.

When she thought she could hear giggling, everyone around them was watching her way.
Her older sisters were looking her way, grinning.
She feared what comes after.
She was extremely ill at ease.

Gaoshun, who appeared unnoticed, folded his arms in relief.
As if to say that one task was finished.

Because she was already embarrassed about something or other

at something, she couldn't really remember what happened after that.
Just that, she remembered that her older sisters' questioning was very persistent.

○●○

A few days later, a beautiful nobleman appeared in the capital's prostitution quarter.

Carrying money that even dazzled the madam, and for some reason, a strange plant that grew from a bug, that man requested for one girl.

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